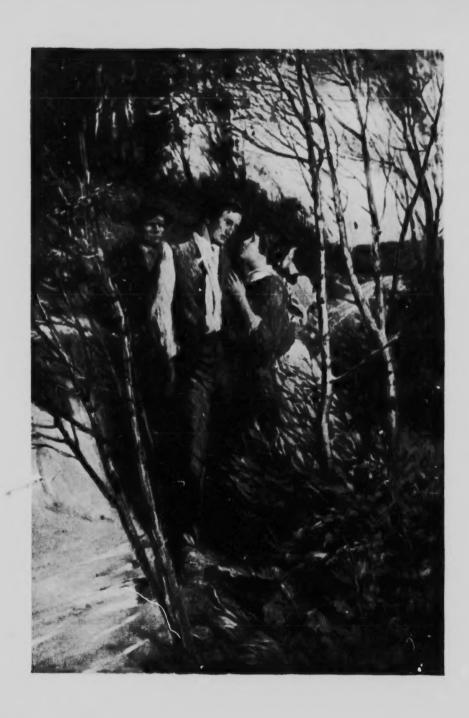
MARGARET · P · MONTAGUE









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BY

MARGARET PRESCOTT MONTAGUE
Author of "The Poet, Miss Kate and I"

With Frontispiece by W. T. BENDA



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MY FATHER AND MOTHER



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CHAPTER I

AT THE MAPLE SPRING STAND

TT was early, early of an October morning in the Jumping Creek Draft — a certain little lost valley cuddled away among the West Virginia mountains: so little and so lost that by day it showed as hardly more than a wrinkle in the genial old face of the blue Alleghanies. Day had not yet begun to break, but already the air was touched with the smell of dawn, and the vigorous promise of oncoming light and vivacity. The moon, in its splendour of autumnal fullness. swung low in the West, attended by one lone star which flashed a glorious defiance to the prospective morning. If it had been light, and the landscape not blotted out in fog, one could have seen the valley checker-boarded all over with tumbled worm fences their outlines blurred with blackberry vines and sassafras growth - which separated the small holdings one from another, with here and there a sombre little cabin — the kernel of its homestead — glimpsed at through a haze of apple trees and improved fruit.

And if a giant had taken his great thumb and rubbed all the trees off the mountains, as a ruthless child brushes the fuzz from a butterfly's wing, he would have

laid bare many more of these little dwellings, hidden in the hollows and clinging to the tops of the mountains; but on some of the ridges, the wildest and loneliest, he might have rubbed very long before uncovering anything (and doubtless in the end his thumb would have been very full of prickles).

On this particular morning, upon the small porch of one of the cabins, whose hewn logs had weathered long since to a soft greyness, the giant might have seen, without troubling himself to rub away many trees, for the house hung upon a somewhat bare prominence, a little boy jumping up and down in the moonlight and kicking his toes — copper-rimmed stogey toes they were — together, for this before-daylight atmosphere was chill.

It was Alderson Cree's cabin, and the active figure of boyhood dancing there was David Cree, sent out to the porch to await his father, who settled indoors with Kip Ryerson before taking David on the deer hunt promised for that morning.

Of all boy-ages perhaps twelve is the least interesting, being the intermediate stage after babyhood, and before any of the future possibilities of manhood have developed themselves. And I do not know that David Cree was any exception to this general rule; yet perhaps some people would have been struck, in the first place, by the sturdiness of his small figure, giving promise of great strength to come, and then by the alertness of his face, and flash of his quick dark eyes.

A faded slouch hat sat upon the back of his head,

and a cotton shirt of the hickory variety disappeared into blue overalls, which in turn were tucked into the stogey boots; a costume, on the whole, none too warm for a nippy morning before sun-up. David, however, had his own opinion of boys who took to coats before the middle of October, and much preferred for warmth the jumping up and down method.

In couples the boy held by a chain two perfectly matched hounds, of the rather rare blue-speckled colouring, much esteemed in the Jumping Creek Draft; while tied to the yard fence was another great dog — white, this one with tan spots — who yawned chilly now and again, and seemed scarcely interested in anything that might be about to happen.

In front of the boy and dogs the valley lay steeped in mists of a silver fleeciness, and across all that wonderful opal tinting the Drupe Mountains opposite, big and little, shouldered each other darkly in the moonlight. At the back Peter's Ridge drew a fierce, straight line across the sky. Suddenly from this ridge, cutting the clear air vibrant with the expectancy of sound, and breaking, as it spread among the hollows into a rainbow of scattered echoes, came the exquisite full note of a hunter's horn. The three hounds sprang against their collars, choked, coughed, and then gave tongue joyously. The boy put his own cow's horn, hanging across his shoulder, to his lips, and sent a glorious response across and across the valley, to be pursued by the wild baying of his dogs, and of others upon the ridge.

Impatient as the aroused hounds, David danced again. Why couldn't his father get done with Kip and come on? There were the Henderson boys on the way to their stand now, and there — yes, there was Silas Blair blowing up at the Divide, — that was Rosy and Ring answering — and there were the squeaky young voices of Silas's two pups. David knew every dog's mouth all up and down the Draft, almost as well as he knew the mouths of his own three.

Well, they might bring out any dog they pleased, he'd bet they couldn't any of them outrun old Buck, and he cast an affectionate glance at the great dog by the fence. As he did so there came suddenly from within the house a burst of men's voices sharp with anger, and all at once the door behind him was dashed open and Kip Ryerson flung out - his evil face more sneaking and wicked than ever. David caught his black look and grinned in malicious triumph, for he hated Ryerson, and was not afraid of him. He was answered by an appalling oath from the man as he passed him and slouched out of the yard. Instantly the boy's face went white and his eyes burnt. Like a streak he leaped from the porch and caught up a jagged wicke 1-looking stone. But it never flew at the man's unconscious back, for as David's hand went back swiftly his wrist was caught in a sudden grasp. Tighter and tighter the grip closed upon him, until slowly his fingers opened, and the stone dropped harmlessly to the ground.

In a fury David whirled upon his father. "He

cussed me!" he cried. "He cussed me!" his voice shrilling with anger.

"An' I'll skin yer ef I ever ketch yer throwin' er stone at er feller's back ergin. Don't ever do anything ter er man till yer big enough ter do hit ter his face." His father's voice was low and somewhat heavy, but it held no lack of purpose.

For a moment they looked into each other's eyes, the two faces, man's and child's, singularly alike, and singularly determined in expression. Then Alderson Cree dropped his son's wrist and turned away, realizing, perhaps for the first time, what a duplicate of himself the boy was. Taking up a clumsy, old-fashioned rifle which leaned against the door-jamb, he dropped it to his shoulder, and stepped off the porch.

"Come on," he said briefly; and the boy and dogs fell in obediently behind. As they took their way Indian file up the rugged little path leading to the top of Peter's Ridge, David watched Ryerson's loose figure fade into the heavy mist.

"Reckon he won't come back an' skeer mammy an' ther kids?" he ventured.

"Reckon he'd better not," his father answered in the same slow, heavy voice, yet somehow David held no longer any fear for his mother and the children. He had the same confidence in his father that he had in himself, and at that time his confidence in himself was unbounded.

There was something in the man's arrogant unafraidness and physical power that found answer in the

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boy, and he felt a keen exultation in his father, and wished eagerly that he might have been in the house when the settlement with Ryerson had taken place. But at the beginning of it all, his mother had hastily given him his noon snack, and a sharp push towards the door, a push not to be disregarded.

It was a settlement that had promised for weeks past; ever since Alderson Cree found out the character of the man he had consented to board. And when, the night before, David had returned with his father and mother from preaching to find Ryerson in a drunken sleep upon the kitchen floor, and the younger children who had been left at home almost hysterical with fright, he had known that the settlement would come next morning. And so it had. And oh! but he was glad! Glad that Ryerson's weak, hateful face would not be there to leer across the supper table at him to-night.

For a whole month Ryerson had boarded with the Crees, and for a whole month David had hated him. Why, childlike, he never troubled himself to ask; but there were good enough reasons for his aversion. In the first place Ryerson came from Rattle Snake Run, which lay on the other side of Peter's Ridge, somewhere among the Clear Creek Mountains, the inhabitants of which were a whole cut below the people of the Jumping Creek Draft, or at least 30 the Draft people thought, and perhaps in their heart of hearts the Rattle Snake Run folks thought the same.

Ryerson had been tempted over into the Jumping Creek neighbourhood to work at Ed McAdams's saw-

mill — an institution which had brought in several curious characters, and had carried out very many noble trees.

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ng W- That he was an alien from his own home draft would have been cause enough for hatred with an intense little nature like David's, but more than that, after the first day or so, David knew like a flash that his father also disliked him. Added to all this there was as well a far-away rumour that Ryerson was wanted in Virginia, where he had worked before, for the killing of a man. But that was away over in Virginia, and was nothing more than a rumour anyway. Yet Ryerson's personality was not one to carry off such a report, and perhaps public sentiment was best voiced by George Hedrick, the storekeeper, when he said, "Ef Kip Ryerson ain't er murderer I'll be mightily diserpinted, fer I certainly would hate ter think er honest feller could look so powerful lik raskil."

But now it was all over and he vas gone — he was gone! David's heart sang it in jubilation, and he gave a little caper of sheer relief and squared his sturdy young shoulders, for he felt that a hateful burden had lifted from them, and a black cloud swept away from his immediate horizon. Besides, day was breaking gloriously on this hunting morning and he was a boy, and alive!

The moon had faded to a pale wanness when they topped the ridge, and emerging into a cleared field caught sight of her once more, and the attendant star had lost all its gay defiance.

All at once, somewhere in the still woods, in its sleep, a little bird fell from its perch, and with a startled squeak awoke, and behold, it was daylight! That astonishing, that triumphant thing daylight! And the bird filled its throat ecstatically and poured forth all its astonishment and delight in a glorious solo. In a moment its voice woke its slumbering neighbours and each in turn took up its chant of surprise and jubilation that the wonderful event of dawn should really have occurred once more!

And there in the path before them David and his father found Orin Snyder and the two Henderson boys, who were to be the drivers on the hunt that day, waiting for Bet and Bounder, and the old dog Buck. David turned his dogs over to them and fell into a choppy little trot behind the men's long steps, which soon brought them up to the main body of the hunters on their way to the different stands along the ridge.

The men greeted one another carelessly with familiar "Howdys" as men who saw each other almost daily, in their usual occupations, and dropped into desultory conversation as they swung along in the heavy, uneven mountain gait. For the most part they were of the long and lank mountain type, angular and slouching but strong when the need came — with a certain wiry, unlooked-for strength. Most of them carried hunter's horns, and all had their firearms, such as they were — a heterogeneous collection of old-fashioned muzzle-loading rifles and more newly acquired shotguns.

There were the two McClintic boys - silent brothers

whose farm joined Alderson Cree's where it ran up Peter's Ridge; Silas Blair and his small brother Adrian, a year or the like older than David, and George Hedrick, who preferred hunting to storekeeping, besides the Henderson boys and Orin Snyder, the drivers.

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There were four stands filled on Peter's Ridge that morning, three men who drove, and eight dogs in the pack; Silas Blair's brace of pups on their first trial, and his older dogs, Rosy and Ring, David's three, and the storekeeper's little Venus.

For years afterwards any inhabitant of the Jumping Creek Draft could have told just the placing of each man upon the stands, and all the littlest details of that hunt — there were reasons why the details burnt themselves upon men's minds.

At the notch in the mountain, where a path takes down the ridge and crosses to the Clear Creek range, the drivers struck off with the dogs, leaving the others to make their way to the different stands along the top of the mountain, for the course of a deer started on Clear Creek is over Peter's Ridge at some one of its low places, and across the Jumping Creek Draft, to the Drupe Mountains, at the foot of whose western slope the hunted thing seeks sanctuary in the Drupe River.

At the same notch where the drivers left them, Blair and his small brother stayed, for it was the Blue Swamp stand. At the Divide the storekeeper dropped out, while half a mile or so further on David and his father settled themselves at the Maple Spring, leaving

the two McClintics to make their way lonesomely to the low place at the foot of Hare Hill.

At the Maple Spring the first long rays of sunshine crept across from the Clear Creek Mountains and touched the frost with a silver sheen. The stand was a warm little cup in the ridge where the mountain dipped so low as to be hardly more than a high hill. So warm and sheltered a place was it, that here the very earliest hepaticas opened their spring eyes, with blood root and claytonias treading hard upon their heels. And doubtless the desirability of the situation went abroad through all the woods, for every year more and more flower families came trooping in, making the place in spring and summer a very miracle of bloom and fragrance.

But now of all that wealth of blossom, only the ghosts of the crosier golden-rod were left to tell the tale, and a few late and dilapidated asters, over which a bee or two buzzed complainingly, for it was really too unreasonable of the flowers to expect any bee to go honey-gathering after frost. Left alone, David and his father dropped silently to their posts, opposite ends of a fallen chestnut oak tree, denuded long since of its tan bark. The man with his gun across his knees, and his eyes growing vacant as his face settled into lines of thought; the boy, with his hunter's horn, in lieu of gun, in his lap, his ears pricked for the first faint yelp of the hounds, and his eyes looking away to range upon range of the Clear Creek Mountains, drifting off into indistinct outlines where the sky and

mountains met and faded to a blue haze. And there - away and away over there, David knew were the mountains of Virginia. The mountains of Virginia! What words to conjure with! They had always a certain magic ring for the boy — why he scarcely knew. Only, "Over in Virginia" were words to unlock doors leading into mystery and wonderment. Over in Virginia were romance and history. There was a fat and fertile land, from whence came watermelons, and where persimmons — whatever they might be — fell down in the autumn, mellowed by frost. Whenever the boy dreamed, though in truth his busy little life found small time for dreams, his fancy always passed first through the gate of words "Over in Virginia," and once through ran riot in fields of watermelons, and under persimmon trees. It was his delectable land, this land seen from the mountain windows of his home valley. When he was grown perhaps he would go there — perhaps — yet after all wasn't it almost better to lie upon a slope of his own hills and speculate upon those far-away blue ones?

He lay back now against some stout undergrowth, and from its yielding arms, under dropped lids, took in the scene before him. It was that time in the year when the splendour and glory of the hills catch the breath, and when to each of us are "The Mountains of Virginia," be they what they may, most desirable and most touched with the joyous, illusive flavour of romance.

As the sun rose, he flared the near hillsides into

burning colours, set off and cooled by the dark evergreens, and the oaks' deeper hue, rich as the bronze of a wild turkey's plumage; while from the distant hills he dissipated the last little clouds and shreds of mist. Over on one of the far mountains arose a blue curl that was not mist. David sniffed the air. A faint smell of burning woods mingled with the odour of dying leaves.

"Reckon we'll hev ter fight fire soon," he ventured. His father made no response, and it was as though he had not heard; the lines even of his face did not relax, and glancing at him David knew that his thoughts dwelt on Kip Ryerson, and that he was still in a silent passion of anger. Again David wished that he ad been in at the settlement. That it had been bitter for Ryerson he guessed well enough, familiar with his father's arrogance. In his younger days before his marriage, Alderson Cree had been known for the readiest fighter all up and down the Draft, and men still said of him — "Alderson ain't hed ter take his coat off fer er right smart while, but I reckon ef hit was ter come er feller'd find ther same ole man inside hit."

It was probably this reputation that had put the sting of insolence into Cree's settlement with Ryerson, and doubtless, it was this also, that had made the latter take the settlement in sullen unresistance. David waited a little space, watching his father for an answer to his remark, and getting none, at length drifted back into his own thoughts.

It was almost his first deer stand, and if his pulses jumped with the excitement of it, what wonder, when at times even the oldest hunters take "buck ague"?

Eagerly he strained his ears for every sound. The occasional far-away cry of a hound made him start, and the murmur of the little creek at the foot of the ridge might be a deer running. After a time he got out his knife stealthily, and began with silent patience to pare and scrape his horn, making long curled shavings to the notched mouthpiece — for here the horn should be infinitely thin, and then to be perfect it should be polished and darkened by many a long wait on deer stands. David had cast envious eyes on Adrian Blair's horn that morning, it was better than his, darker and thinner, but then Adrian, living on the top of Drupe Mountain, belonged to a hunting family, and had been on many more stands than he. Only that fall he had killed all alone his first deer. David remembered the other boy's excited face when he came off the hunt all streaked with the dead animal's blood, done by the older hunters to show it was his first. And he wondered how soon they would let him keep a stand alone.

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The day wore on toward nine o'clock; it was clear and getting hot. The boy began to feel drowsy in the warm stillness. He thought vaguely that it was just as well that his father and he had come hunting, as it would have been too dry anyway to go on with their corn-shucking.

Presently he was thirsty. Across the dip of the hollow

a maple tree, sending its roots deep, had tapped a spring, and the cool waters bubbled out deliciously from under the tree, giving to the stand its name of the "Maple Spring," and adding their gurgling contribution to the little creek at the foot of the ridge.

David glanced at his father; the man still sat in the

same statue-like pose.

"Reckon I'll git er drink," he said, rising stiffly. Again the man made no reply, and the boy, hardly

expecting any, crossed over to the spring.

The maple tree was old and its leaves had turned early and fallen before the rest of the trees had dropped theirs, like some aged person, tired by the weight of years, and ready for bed and slumber, the first of all. David stepped carefully among its decorates, trying not to wake their sharp rustle. Disturbed by his feet they gave up a hot, dry fragrance of sunshine and fall weather, and afterwards the remembrance of that day always leaped back upon him with the perfume of dying leaves.

At the spring he flung himself down and was just about to set his lips to the water when his ears caught the joyous burst of the hounds running in full cry—they had jumped a deer on Clear Creek. David's heart gave a great bound that almost choked him, yet in spite of his excitement he stooped again to the spring. There was a moment in which he might snatch his drink, and yet get back to his post by his father in time, for the dogs were not near yet.

For a few moments he drank eagerly, then suddenly,

unexpectedly he stopped — a wave of paralyzing fear swept over him. He had not seen anything, he had not heard anything, yet all at once the stillness in the woods was ominous of something horrible, something appalling. Terrified he lay upon the brink of the little spring, slightly raised by his two hands, and waited; hearing nothing but the tonguing of the dogs and seeing nothing but his own frightened face, which the water gave back. Then it came — a sharp report, a cry, and something fleeing through the crashing underbrush—With an answering scream David leaped to his feet and looked. His father had slipped from the log on which he sat and lay a huddled heap upon the ground, shot in the back.

David sprang toward him, "Pappy, Pappy!" he cried. He had not seen any one, yet in the distance he still heard heavy feet tearing through the undergrowth as something fled desperately down the ridge.

As David stooped over him, his father opened his eyes, vacantly at first, but gradually meaning and hate grew in them. He caught his breath in hard gasps, and his gaze centred upon David. With an effort he raised one hand and dropped it to the boy's trembling shoulder, but from there it slipped down his arm until the weakening fingers closed on his wrist at the same spot where they had gripped him in the morning; the place was still sore and bruised.

"It was Ryerson done hit," he panted. "Ryerson done hit. I ain't seen him but I know he done hit. He's killed yer Pappy"—he paused, fighting for

breath. "He's killed yer Pappy," he repeated; then
— "Ef ther law don't kill him, promise me you will."
He stopped again for breath, his terrible dying eyes
searching David's face. For a moment the boy hesitated, too dazed by it all to understand.

Again the fingers twitched his wrist, and the insistent voice went on, "He's killed yer Pappy, he's killed yer

Pappy, would yer let him live?"

All at once David's stunned senses woke, and hatred, more awful than that upon the man's dying face, stamped itself upon the boy's. Alderson Cree saw the look and his voice rose almost to a scream,

"Promise, promise!" he cried, "promise --"

The words were lost in a sudden overpowering burst of sound, as the hounds in full cry topped a nearby ridge.

At the same instant a great frightened buck swept across the little runlet and sprang past up the mountain, almost trampling upon the man and boy. A moment later the hounds burst upon them and David noted, unconscious that he did so, that old Buck led them all, little Venus hard upon him, and Silas Blair's puppies running pantingly in the rear.

"Promise, promise!" his father's voice took up its burden out of the chaos of sound as the hunt swept

away.

"Oh! I do, I do!" David cried, passionately. "I promise yer, Pappy, I promise!"

At the words his father's fingers loosed their hold, and dropped satisfied to the ground.

"Tell ther fellers," he gasped, and shut his eyes.

David tore his heavy boots from his feet and with one last look at his father fled down the uneven and rocky path to the storekeeper's stand, running as he had never run before in all his life, his eyes starting wildly from his blanched face, and his heart leaping as though it would leap out of his body.

Pcter's Ridge is traced all over with faint, indefinite little paths, made, some by cattle, and some worn in a winter by a few patient school children walking Indian file; and some seem made by hobgoblins for the purpose of misleading mortal feet, for after many a devious twist and turn they grow gradually more indistinct until suddenly one finds that they have faded altogether into the green undergrowth — so that it behooves only the initiated to tread the maze of this ridge.

Along one of these side paths, better marked than most, and which eventually dips close to the Maple Spring, a sombre little figure moved in and out through the golden light of that October morning; a little withered old woman, her head bound in a black handkerchief and again covered by a sunbonnet of the same indistinct colouring as the rest of her dress, which had all faded long since into one indeterminate hue. In one thin little hard hand she carried a tin pail, from which occasional splashes of buttermilk spilled to the ground, in the other she clutched a roll of quilt pieces. She walked unevenly, for she was feeble, though not as old as she looked, and all the wonderful play of

light across the path, and the autumn perfumes, did not affect her in the least; for with nature always present in her existence, and people rarely, naturally the latter claimed her keenest interest, and now as she walked along past moss-grown stones, and little green patches of wild grass, this old Martha Lamfire was thinking only of her visit to Mrs. Henderson, and of the quilt pieces she had given her, as well as the buttermilk. As her thoughts ran on she occasionally mumbled them half out loud to herself, and when she presently neared the Maple Spring, she murmured an intention of getting a drink there. A little later, however, when she would have pushed the undergrowth aside to emerge upon the spring, a deep-caught groan arrested her. At the unexpected sound the old woman jumped back as instinctively as she would have done at the whirr of a rattle-snake, and it was characteristic, that before looking forward again, she first looked back. Assured that no one observed her, she carefully pushed the branches aside and peered into the hollow, her faded sunbonnet poking through with the alert inquiry of an old turkey hen. Leaning thus eagerly forward, she caught sight of Alderson Cree's huddled figure. For a space she looked at him in bewilderment, then with a low murmur of compassion she would have moved toward him, but at the moment the man writhed slightly to one side and she saw his face, which until then had been turned from her. Instantly she checked her forward movement and the pity in her own face went out. For a space again she stood still, looking at

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him lying there in the tragic little hollow; then cautiously step by step she began to draw back; but all at once she stopped to listen—the man was praying, his voice sounding strange and broken in the sunny stillness of the woods.

The words came with a sudden burst —

"Oh! Lord," he cried, "let me just live ter tell Dave hit don't matter. Lord, I didn't think, I didn't know then, I didn't understan'. Let me jest live ter make him take back his promise." And again — "O Lord, send me ter Heaven or Hell, but jest let me tell Dave not ter kill Kip Ryerson."

Where dying thoughts wander, who can guess? Surely they move quickly at the last. Certainly Alderson Cree's, faced by Eternity, had flashed far from the grim promise he had exacted from his son such a short while ago.

As he prayed, the old woman, standing waist deep in the painted undergrowth, pressed the roll of quilt pieces hard against her lips to still their mumbling, but a dry twig snapped and she caught her breath too quickly. The man heard and cried out:

"Who's that?"

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The old woman neither moved nor answered.

"Who's there?" he cried again sharply, and would have turned in her direction, only he could not. Yet he felt that some one was there, some one who stood silently in the bushes and watched him.

"Come here so's 1 kin see yer. Come here," he begged pantingly. Still the old woman did not move.

The man waited hopefully an instant and then cried piteously, "Fer God's sake come here!"

She did not come, yet he heard her breathing distinctly

now.

"Ef yer won't come ter er dying man," he cried desperately, "take my word ter David. Tell him I say not ter kill Kip Ryerson ef ther law don't git him. I'll not last ter tell him myself. Tell him hit don't matter, I didn't think. Oh! tell him! Tell him." The voice broke and trailed away into silence. Still no answer, and still the person was there.

Then fury rose in Alderson Cree, and with all his

dving strength he cursed.

"Yer devil!" he cried, "whoever yer aire, give my word ter David, or by — I'll be er waitin' fer yer on ther doorstep of Hell when yer come."

At the awful words the trembling old woman, with horror in her eyes, turned and fled away down the path, spilling the buttermilk in long white streaks, the pieces still pressed to her mouth, and the broken, dying voice wailing after her:

"I'll be er waitin' fer yer. I'll be waitin'."

Thus at the last Alderson Cree sought to take his hand from the plough of vengeance he had started, but an old woman, for a reason forgotten by all save herself, laid hers to it, eager to furrow out a revenge of her own.

When the two Blairs and the storekeeper with David reached the hollow, running hard, Cree was speechless, but as they started to lift him, his dying eyes arrested

them. Dimly they flashed over the group and settled on his son.

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vid ess, sted "He's got somethin' ter say ter yer, Davy," the storekeeper said quickly. "Po' feller, he's mos' gene."

"Don't —" Cree managed to gasp, with a fierce effort, "Don't —" But then there was a gurgle in his throat, he choked and stopped, the blood running from his lips in a red line. But David flung himself beside him, crying passionately:

"I won't fergit, I won't fergit! I've promised yer Pappy, I've promised."

And so, with the boy's reiterated promise in his cars, Alderson Cree died.

CHAPTER II

AMABEL LAMFIRE

When old Martha Lamfire reached her own little log doorstep, after her wild stumbling run through the undergrowth of Peter's Ridge, she sank down on it panting and exhausted, and vaguely glad of the familiar aspect of things; for, deeply shaken as she was from her usual routine of thought, she was as confused and stupefied as some mole suddenly torn from its accustomed dark runways. She had snagged an immense hole in her skirt, and almost all the buttermilk was spilt, but these mishaps went unheeded as she sat staring uncertainly across the dazzling sunlight of the yard. Her lips mumbled more than ever, and every now and again she shook her head in bewilderment, and muttered, "Alderson Cree! O Lord, Alderson Cree!" as though the thing were unbelievable.

To her it was so, for her thoughts swept back to fourteen years ago when Alderson Cree, in all his vigour of youth, had first come stepping up to that same doorstep to see Amabel Lamfire.

That Martha Lamfire, married rather late in life, and already drawn and withered by rough work, should have a daughter of a startling and unusual

AMABEL LAMFIRE

dark beauty, was a source of wonderment to the Jumping Creek neighbourhood — to Martha herself it was nothing short of a miracle. From the first the child was to her a being exalted and set apart; the only beautiful thing her life had ever realized. For her husband she had never cared particularly, and when he died, slipping away as unobtrusive in death as he had been in life, his decease was almost a relief to Martha, for it left her sole and undisputed possessor of Amabel, her marvel of beauty and delight.

All alone the two lived together in the Mossy Run Holiow. Their little log cabin, of one room with a half loft above, backed darkly against a northern arm of Peter's Ridge.

"Lonesome? Wal, I reckon," George Hedrick was wont to say. "Great Day! Ef I was goin' ter ther penitentiary, I'd steal somethin' sure 'nough an' git sent there right. Er side office like ther Mossy Holler wouldn't satisfy me."

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But it satisfied Martha Lamfire. From it she somehow wrung a living for herself and Amabel. Two tolerably well-fed cows, a bunch of chickens, a little patch of ground, and a harness-galled and rickety old horse, together with a pig or two, made up their source of income; and if the girls down further in the Draft, where the valley opened into broader fields, and the mountains pressed less hard upon one, and life altogether was sunnier and more genial, had hands coarsened by work, and figures bent before their time by carrying heavy baby sisters and brothers, Amabel

Lamfire, treasured in her dark and lonely hollow, led the life of a mountain princess. People marvelled at the fury of work the old woman — for at forty the women are old in the Draft — laid upon herself, in order that Amabel should know only the soft side of life; and the amount spent on the girl's clothes was a scandal to the whole community. George Hedrick, always the distributor of local gossip, could tell of the fall Martha brought a butchered pig to the store to trade in goods.

"It was a right nice fat hog, an' when I tole her how much hit weighed, she ses right out, 'Well, now, I jist want all er thet hog ter go right on my Amabel's back,' an' her eyes were jest er shinin'. An' there was Ammy standin' back jest as quiet an' pretty lookin', an' not me' en ther pint er her chin showin' under her sunbonnet poke — don' know's I ever reely seed her face thout stoopin' down an' lookin' right into her bonnet — but bet yer Alderson Cree knows ther colour er her eyes all right."

Always gentle and sweet-natured, Amabel, too, led as contented a life as her mother. Happy in the summers with her little patch of flowers, and what light work her mother let her undertake, and in the winter doing little odd jobs of sewing, her sweet, slow smiles making up the sunshine of the old woman's existence. Placid and contented, Amabel's life was nevertheless negative, until that day in early autumn when Alderson Cree came along their path, up the hollow, past the spring, and over the yard fence, and pausing on the doorstep

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asked Amabel to go to preaching with him the next Sunday.

After that first Sunday, all through the winter and spring Alderson went with her. And in those days, just turned seventeen, Amabel Lamfire's indefiniteness dropped from her, and she awoke. She was spirit, she was fire, she was life and incarnate happiness.

At first old Martha was proud that Alderson Cree, the likeliest man in the Draft, with the inheritance of the old Cree Place to back him, should be going with her Ammy, though she considered it nothing more than the girl's due, and not to be wondered at that the best should be hers; but presently, after the first flush of triumph over the other mothers of the Draft, and as she saw the lights flash up in Amabel's face at Alderson's coming, and fade with his departure, the old woman began to be assailed with stabs of sudden jealousy. Her child could never again be her very own, all in all, as she had been. Already the vital part of her was Alderson's. This little thing for whom she had toiled, and whom she had guarded with all the devotion of her fierce nature, was given to another, before, it seemed to her, her own love had had fairly a taste of her. As her jealousy grew, for days together Martha Lamfire had silent fits of sullenness, or only spoke to break out upon Alderson in vituperation; and once started her old tongue laid itself to many a sharp thing, making Amabel wince and look at her pleadingly, as Alderson's face whitened with suppressed anger. For a long time he stood her abuse well enough, held

in check by the girl's beseeching eyes, but at last there came a day when jealousy whipped the old woman into a very fury, and her words leaped all the bounds of self-control. Stung beyond endurance, Alderson Cree turned upon Amabel and swore she should choose between himself and her mother.

"Ef yer keer fer me," he said, "we'll git married termorrow. But it's got ter be me er her, fer I'll never come under the saine roof with thet old wildcat ergin."

"Oh! don't, don't!" the girl cried pitcously, and would have put her arms about his neck, but he held her away from him sternly, crying, "Make yer choice!"

Amabel loved Alderson Cree with her very soul, but in that moment his face was hard even to her, and she looked across to her mother. The old woman, all at once realizing the disaster her unbridled tongue had wrought, stood in a white fear, expecting to see her child slip from her forever. Looking at her, it swept suddenly over the girl what they two had been to each other, in all the lonesome years of the little hollow, with never anybody to come between. For a moment she wavered, imploring Alderson with dark, tragic eyes; then as his look showed no softness, she turned and went over to Martha with a set little face, as though in that moment her thoughts leaped forward and read the calamity that her mother's very love had brought upon her. At the sight Alderson Cree flung out of the house, and once again Martha Lamfire had sole possession of her treasure.

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But the lights were out and the spirit was gone from Amabel. Never by word or deed did she reproach her mother, but her lifeless face was a constant daily stab to the old woman, and sometimes in very irritation of love she would break out upon her for her want of spirit. Amabel never answered her, indeed she gave no sign of hearing, save occasionally to look at her mother with a sad little tolerant smile. It was not a week before Martha, unknown to her daughter, went to Alderson Cree and begged him to come back.

"I know hit was all my fault, because I allers did hev sech er turrible tongue, but jest come back this onct an' I'll never speak yer er cross word ergin," she pleaded.

But Alderson was a narrow man and a hard one, once the boundary of his toleration was overleaped, and his only answer was:

"Tell Ammy I'll marry her terr. rrow ef she'll hev me, but tell her hit's got ter be me er you onct fer all."

Martha went back hopelessly, and even gave Amabel Alderson's message, but the girl shook her head and crept close to her mother.

"You an' me'll never be parted, will we, Mammy?" she said, and again pressing closer, "You an' me's been best friends, ain't we?" she said.

Two weeks afterwards Alderson took up with Judy Leister, a little red-haired thing who had sprung quite suddenly from bare-footed childhood into wemanhead.

Amabel had no lack for other suitors, but there s

no power to respond left in her. Her first great passion was her only one, and she was left no more than a shell of her glower described self, like some rare flower whose vitality is a musted in the one perfect blossom.

People of the Jumping Creek Draft do not die of heart-break — they have no time for it — but when the soul has gone out of things the littlest and lightest occupations are heavy, and the slightest blow overwhelming. When the fall came — a year from the fall when Alderson Cree first came stepping up their little hollow — and the fever was prevalent through the Draft, Amabel found no spirit in her to resist it, and went down like a frost-nipped flower.

A week later Martha Lamfire, with hard-clinched hands, peered out of the darkness into Mack Leister's cheery little cabin, with Alderson and Judy Leister sitting side by side roasting chestnuts at the fire. Presently in all that firelight coziness the man was conscious of some one calling his name.

"Alderson, Alderson Cree!"

He rose hastily and went out, drawing the door to after him.

"Who wants me?" he said, half fearfully to the darkness. A voice answered out of the shadows, and he narrowed his eyes to catch sight of Martha.

"Alderson," she begged, "my girl's dvin'—Ammy's dyin'—an' yer ther only person kin save her—fer God's sake come ter her, an' I swear I'll go off somewheres erway from here an' never ergin set foot nigh

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her er you — jest come ter her now, an' yer kin hev her fer all yer own."

The man looked at her a moment in silence, and when at length he spoke his voice was almost piteous.

"I can't," he said, "I can't go ter her; me an' Judy's ter be married in ther mornin'."

"Then you an' me've killed her betwixt us—" Martha Lamfire said in a dead voice, and went away into the shadows.

The next day Alderson and Judy Leister drove over to Wayside, the county town, and were married, and the next Sunday, just a year from the Sunday she and Alderson first went to preaching together, Amabel Lamfire slipped away. She died holding her mother's hand, and the last conscious thing she said, with a little white smile, was:

"You an' me's allers been best friends, ain't we, Mammy?"

But afterwards she drifted into delirium, and for a long time she called Alderson Cree's name over and over.

The night after they buried Amabel, Martha Lamfire stole out of her house while the neighbour, who was staying with her to break the first loneliness, was asleep, and wandering away in the mountains was lost for two nights and a day in the cold woods of late October. And when at length a search party found her she seemed dazed and curious, and always afterwards the Draft people said, "She hed er kinder crazy streak in her."

And all of this had happened near upon fourteen years ago. Even the Draft had almost forgotten Amabel, and outside of the Draft she had never been known. Her knowledge of the world and its knowledge of her had all been girdled in a five-mile radius; to all appearances a small enough splash of existence — but even the smallest splashes leave widening ripples behind them.

Martha lived on, a lonesome and forlorn old woman, disliked by most and feared by all, for her crazy streak and for her terrible tongue, which lashed recklessly at any and all her neighbours.

Sitting now in the autumn sunshine after her tumultuous flight down the mountain, the shaken old woman called up the whole past in review, and again she muttered in stupefaction, "Alderson Cree! O Lord, Alderson Cree! I asked yer onct ter come ter my girl—yer didn't low then yer'd ever be er beggin' me fer God's sake ter come ter you." And then as her thoughts travelled on she muttered triumphantly—"Aha! Judy Leister! Reckon your boy'll hev er tough row ter hoe too!"

As she muttered the words a man stepped heavily over her yard fence and stood before her; raising her head she looked up into Kip Ryerson's face. With almost a spring she got to her feet — yet, though she was startled, the little shrivelled old woman was not afraid.

Ryerson was pale and his eyes held in them a queer look, yet he managed his greeting naturally enough.

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"Howdy, Mis' Lamfire," he said, "I come ter see could I git board with you?"

Martha regarded him in silence for a moment; at length she said:

"Thought yer was boardin' with ther Cree folks?"

"I was," Ryerson answered easily, "but Alderson's woman don't cook ter suit me, an' I lowed I'd git board with you — it's most as nigh ter ther mill anyhow."

Then Martha Lamfire drew her tense little figure up, and setting her bony hands upon her hips, with superb recklessness she shot her bow; spurred on partly because she really did not care whether she lived or died, and partly, perhaps, because of the crazy streak.

"Ah! — Ha-a!" she said with slow scorn. "So Judy Cree don't cook ter please yer, an' reckon ef I wa'n't ter cook ter suit yer neither yer'd shoot me like yer done Alderson Cree."

At her words Ryerson gave a great start, and his hands flew forward as though to wring her skinny neck; but he checked himself and fell back a step or two.

"You old devil!" he cried. "What do yer mean?"

"I mean jest what I say," she screamed her voice cracking to scrillness. "I ain't seen yer kill Alderson Cree, an' reckon nobody else has, an' maybe ther law won't git yer, but ef hit don't David Cree an' Hell will, an' I'll not hev yer stayin' round here while they're er waitin' fer yer!"

And carried away by her fury the old woman made

a spring at him and shook her fist in Ryerson's very face.

It was such a passionate and unexpected attack, and so sudden, that the man's nerve went down before it, and without resistance or reply he turned and fled out of the yard appalled.

And old Martha Lamfire dropped down again to her doorstep, the lights going out of her eyes, and her face settling once more to its look of a dead winter leaf.

CHAPTER III

THE MOULDING OF JUDITH CREE

It was sunnily still, and verging on drowsiness about Alderson Cree's cabin, as the morning drew on towards eleven o'clock. The genial air was faintly redolent with wandering perfumes, and all the world seemed mellowed by the lazy autumnal sunshine. One felt as though the valley lay happily at rest after the bringing forth of its crops, and the gathering in of the kindly fruits of the earth.

In the dooryard a few chickens strolled about indifferently, crooning occasional idle notes to one another, or, getting up a little spirit, meandered over to the frost-nipped vegetable garden where the empty beds offered luxurious dust baths.

Three of the Cree children, with more energy than the hens, played hiding around the stacks of corn fodder in the stable yard; or, when that became too hot an amusement, betook themselves to the illicit joy of burrowing deep into the heart of the stacks themselves, making thereby delightful playhouses of a dark and cavernous nature.

To Judith Cree, Alderson's wife, the world seemed a pleasant place on that October morning. The

warmth and tranquillity of the day went to the very fibres of her being, and stirred them into quick response to all the joys she knew. The simple domestic round of autumn duties which her energy had accomplished, reviewed by the light of that golden weather, appeared blessings of almost a Heaven-sent description. The contented crooning of the chickens about the doorstep; the ripple of the children's play, as it surged in to her now and again in waves of laughter from the stackyard; the perfume of ripened apples; and the occasional sharp whiff of cut fodder - seemed all to her in tune with the day, and things to be glad for. Every now and again as she moved about the house, performing her different tasks with the grace of perfect ability, she smiled to herself, though why she did so she hardly knew. And more than once she said to her mother -old Mrs. Leister, who had made her home with the Crees since her husband's death — that "It certainly was a right pretty day."

The old woman gave but small and unenthusiastic response. Perhaps the drift of Judith's remarks was lost to her in the whirr of her great spinning-wheel, and the incessant tramp of her own feet over the creaking floor, as going forward she attached the fleecy bats of wool — like uncut lambs' tails — to the thread, and walking backwards drew them out into long white strands. Presently, however, letting the thread wind itself to the end about the spindle, she set the slowly dying wheel aside; for it had reached that time in the morning — nearing eleven — when the aged who rise

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carly feel justified in snatching a few moments for their pipe, and to stare vacantly into the fire, ruminating upon the doings of their neighbours, before being again driven to activity by the rush of the dinner hour. She drew her chair up to the uneven stone heartlend caught an ember dexterously on her pipe, preferring the warmth of the smouldering logs - reminders of the early chilliness — to the out-of-door sunshine.

Waked by the sudden hush of the spinning-wheel, the baby set up a small cry from the cradle, stretching eager arms to be taken. She was an adorable baby, with the red hair of her mother and eyes of a wonderful misty blue, the shade of distant mountains. Being the only one of the children with just the Leister colouring - the others having the dark eyes of the Crees — and being also the youngest, Judith had for her an especial tenderness. As the baby felt her mother's arms about her she smiled radiantly at the ease of her victory, and dropped her head with a little snuggling motion against Judith's shoulder. It was an enchanting caress which must have been taught in Heaven, for she was too young a baby to have learned any of the world's blandishments, and at the touch Judith caught her close to her breast, and murmuring little foolishnesses turned to look out over the shining landscape of the valley.

"It certainly is er pretty day," she said again. Then standing in the doorway she began retailing little scraps of the gossip of the neighbours' industry for old Mrs. Leister's benefit.

"Reckon Allie Snyder must be making some apple butter terday. I see er fire down in her yard. Hit's nice weather fer it, but seems like she's right late."

"She allers was jest erbout es triflin' an' no 'count ter work es they make 'em,' the old woman announced, taking her pipe from her mouth for this conclusive statement, and instantly replacing it again.

"Robert Reddin's haulin' his fodder. He certainly hes got er nice show er pum'kins in his field," Judith went on. "Lloyd's folks seem ter be workin' at somethin' up by ther edge er ther woods. Reckon he's layin' him er new fence."

"Then he'd better mind an' git hit layed 'fore hit comes ther dark er ther moon, er ther rails'll go in ther ground; jest es sure es ef yer put on clapboards in ther light er ther moon they'll cup up," grumbled her mother.

"O Maw!" Judith responded tolerantly, and turned again to the out-of-doors. The touch of the baby in her arms, and the beauty spread before her, waked all the unguessed poetry in her nature; and leaning her head against the door-frame she gave herself up to a few moments of happy revery, snatched from the glory of the landscape, and in defiance to the multitude of unattended duties which lay at her back. Looking half unseeingly over the fawn-coloured fields, dotted with yellow pumpkins disclosed by the cutting of the corn, it came to her suddenly, as she reviewed other Octobers she had known, that most of the chief events

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of her life had befallen her in the autumn. It was in the autumn she had gone for almost a year's stay to her uncle's in the Big Spring District; going there by train, an event in itself. The autumn following she had married, and again in the autumn, her first child, David, had been born. Passing these events in review she half smiled, wondering what the present October might have in store for her.

Judith was conscious, too, besides her pleasure in the sweetness of the weather, of a great relief over the departure of Kip Ryerson, for more than once something in the man's look and manner had terrified her, and she had come near to hating him. Though looking at the placid lines of her face, one would have guessed that her life so far had held small taste of hate. Leaning against the door in an attitude of easy grace, her baby on her arm, Judith Cree gave the impression of perfect effortless tranquillity; and in truth, in her whole existence so far, there had been little to disturb her serenity. The things of life which she had greatly desired had almost all come to her without any supreme effort on her part, leaving, as it were, the store of her emotions untouched. Even her marriage had taken place at that youthful period when the whole world is a place of wonderment, with the miraculous lurking just around the turn, so that an event as natural as marriage is to be accepted as scarcely out of the ordinary.

Judith loved Alderson Cree very passionately, but it was with a passion that she herself hardly guessed;

for there had never been, to her knowledge, any ripple in their courtship or subsequent married life to try the emotions of her nature.

She had known, of course, that Alderson had been going with Amabel Lamfire, but on her return to the Jumping Creek Draft from her visit to her uncle, he had almost immediately broken with Amabel, and begun going with her. Judith was aware that she had gone away a child and returned a woman, and her feeling toward the other girl held no jealousy, for the story of Alderson's separation from Amabel, in all its truth, strangely enough, had failed to come to her. And afterwards Alderson had never given her a moment's doubt of his affection, so that her married life had thus flowed happily on to its fourteenth year without trying any of the keener passions of her being, and indeed scarcely writing upon her face the deeper lines of character.

Judith was come to her thirty-second year a handsome woman still, yet already a little dimmed by work. Her red hair had lost much of its brilliance, fading to a rather dull mouse colour, and beginning to streak a little here and there to grey. But it was time and work, and not circumstances, that had aged her face, and it yet remained to be seen whether events would square her still indefinite chin to defiance or mould it into gentle lines.

As she stood happily thus, thinking dreamily of the past, Judith became all at once aware of heavy footsteps approaching the house from the rear. Could

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David and Alderson be returning already from the hunt? But there was a sound of several feet, and uncertain as though men carried something heavy. Possibly they were bringing home the deer, shot perhaps by Alderson, and they were bringing it here to skin and divide. But if the hunt were over where were the dogs? Perhaps they had started another deer and trailed it over into the Drupe Mountains. So Judith Cree stood for a moment and played with her curiosity, as people sometimes will; for in truth she was very content with the baby in her arms, and was in no haste to turn to other things. But suddenly a piercing scream from the old woman startled her. Terrified, she sprung 'round, the baby clutched tight, and there in the dusky light of the cabin she beheld George Hedrick and the two McClintic men lay Alderson Cree's body upon the bed.

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As the purple shadows of the afternoon lay deep in the hollows, and the sun was dropping behind the Drupe Mountains, its slant rays striking only the golden tops of Peter's Ridge, Lloyd Johnson, Alderson Cree's brother-in-law, long and lank, a man with pale blue eyes, a limp wisp of beard, and a great solemnity, rode up the valley to Orin Snyder's. He was mounted upon an old mule of an indefinite dun colour, and in his hand he carried a long peeled wand, notched about a fourth of its way down. When not hunting or working at McAdams's sawmill, Orin Snyder sometimes did odd jobs as a carpenter. He came down now to the

fence to meet Johnson as he rode up. Without greeting, Johnson held the wand up before him.

"This is him in length," he said, "and," turning it horizontal and setting his thumb to the notch, "this is him in width; neat measure, Orin, neat measure."

Solemnly as it was proffered, Snyder took the rod, indicating the last measurements for Alderson Cree, and with it balanced thoughtfully in one hand he looked curiously at it for a few moments before resting it against the fence corner.

"When'll ther funeral be?" he asked at length.

"There won't be no funeral. Brother Hanley's erway holdin' er meetin' in Big Breshey, an' wouldn't git ther word in time, so they low jest ter bury him termorrer at eleven," Lloyd answered.

"Reckon they'll bury him up in the old Cree buryin' ground?"

"Aha-a; an' ther fellers what's goin ter help with ther grave better show up right soon in ther mawnin', fer that ground's pretty nigh all slate an' terrible tough diggin'."

"Why'n they git commenced on hit right erway?" Snyder inquired dubiously. Digging a grave in the chill half-light of dawn for a man one had hunted with the previous morning seemed to him a far from desirable undertaking.

"There was some talk of hit, but Grandmaw Leister wouldn't hear ter havin' no grave she had anythin' ter do with kep' open over night — hit's sech powerful bad luck."

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"Mis' Cree takin' on much?"

"She ain't takin' on none. She's jest like she was froze, cep' she keeps ergoin' an' seein' ter things. Ther ole woman's done all ther hollerin'. Only Judy says she knows Kip Ryerson done hit, jest like Davy says. She says Alderson an' him had high words 'fore Alderson went huntin' an' he made Kip clear out then, an' Judy jest says over an' over, 'Kip Ryerson done hit, I know he done hit.'"

"Hev they ketched up with Kip yit?"

"They's still er huntin' fer him. There was some said they seen him on ther road ter Paine's, an' when I come erway ther fellers was jest startin' up there. Well," gathering up his reins and giving the mule a preliminary dig, "I must be travellin'. Come up in ther mawnin' ef yer git yer job done in time."

Later still that afternoon men found Kip Ryerson at Stephen Paine's where they had consented to board him, word not having come to them of the murder on Peter's Ridge. Arresting him, they carried him into Wayside and placed him in the county jail, there to await the sitting of the November court.

The next morning — in fairness of weather the twin sister of the day before — they laid Alderson Cree among all his Cree connection in the burying-ground on the top of Cree's Hill, from whence one looked all up and down the Jumping Creek Draft and its little branching hollows, wrinkling away darkly into the tawny yellow sides of Peter's Ridge and the Drupe

Mountains; where had lain all the familiar pathways of the man's life.

There was a large gathering, for the whole Draft was present, and many came, too, from over in Clear Creek. Up the tan-coloured hillside, lighted here and there by low yellow hickory bushes, and the occasional flare of a red sumac, the crowd toiled breathlessly, following close upon the slow procession of six men who laboured on in front.

At the grave old Mrs. Leister and Alderson Cree's sister were seized with hysteria, and there were many others of the women who wept; among them, curiously enough, in sudden gusts, old Martha Lamfire. But unsupported Judith Cree stood up straight and frozen by the grave, her face stiffened into the look of horror the morning before had stamped upon it. Dry-eyed and motionless, she watched all the details of the burial, from the placing of the covering boards and the putting in of the two wands — measures for coffin and grave — to the filling in, turn about, by the men, and the final rounding up of the earth at the end, and the laying on of a few late chrysanthemums plucked from different dooryards for Alderson Cree.

David, standing by his mother, took pattern from her stern presence, and his boyish face was as emotionless as her own.

There was no funeral service, for the preacher being away there was no one to hold it, therefore Alderson Cree was committed to the yellow and black slate and the assembly of his kinsfolk with only a short prayer

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and a hymn or two. After it was all over, Judith walked firmly down the hill with David beside her, through the groups of dispersing neighbours, across the little runlet at the foot, and up the opposite hill to her own house. There she picked up the blue-eyed baby from the cradle, and with it held close she sat for a long time, staring straight before her with blank eyes and with the terrible frozen look still upon her face. When at length she rose, the baby was long since asleep, and laying it back in its cradle she turned herself fiercely to the every-day tasks at hand, picking them up where she had dropped them the morning before — which now seemed to have been pushed a thousand years into the past.

CHAPTER IV

FIGHTING FIRE

Some three weeks after the hunt on Peter's Ridge Kip Ryerson was tried at the November court held at Wayside, for the murder of Alderson Cree, and was acquitted.

There was little or no evidence to show against Ryerson, merely the fact of the quarrel between himself and Alderson before the hunt. No weapon had been found to connect him with the murder, and no one testified to having seen him that day upon Peter's Ridge — for old Martha Lamfire kept her own bitter counsel of what had befallen her.

Therefore there was no proof to show Kip Ryerson a murderer, but in the hearts of the Jumping Creek people there was against him a great belief. Nevertheless, confident in his acquittal, Ryerson came back into the Draft on the heels of the crowd which had gone over to Wayside for his trial, and established himself at McAdams's house; for in the face of public opinion, and perhaps of his own secret belief, McAdams still held a place for him at his sawmill; for murderer or no, a better hand in the woods than Kip Ryerson was hard to find.

There might have been a protest that night against his continued presence in the neighbourhood had not the men of the Draft found upon their return an even more crying need awaiting their attention.

The fire which for weeks had burned fitfully in the Clear Creek Mountains, sending a faint blue haze over the country, and making even the near mountains show a blurred and indistinct outline, had crept down from Clear Creek upon this last day of the trial, when most of the men of the Draft were absent at Wayside, and with a sudden high wind at its back had sprung across to an outstretched arm of Peter's Ridge. There it left a red serpent of destruction, and again with the wind to back it, at the Narrows, where a spur of Peter's Ridge and Round Top of the Drupe range almost brush shoulders, it jumped again in little sparks and tongues of flame, and fell upon the seven years' garnered fuel of this section of the Drupe Mountain. Where it lighted, three years before had been a sawmill, which had left, on its departure, a rich hoard of hewn limbs and branches, old stumps, and scattered slabs, all seasoned and desiccated to a quick inflammability, and overlaid with drifts of dead leaves. When the fire's creeping, red fingers first clutched this treasuretrove, it drew a long, low, ominous breath, then, still fanned by its ally the wind, it brightened to an intense glow, and bursting into a great roar like that of falling waters it leaped up the mountain's side in a red sheet of flame, flinging up its thick columns of smoke to high Heaven in grey clouds, shot through with flecks

of dancing white and black cinders; while the undergrowth sent up a crackling scream of anguish as the fire's hot fangs struck into it.

Up the mountain in front flew the little advance fires, their smoke streaming out in wisps from their red centres, like the blown grey hair about the flame faces of the Furies. On they fled in great leaps, those little wild old women, a race for life with them, for behind the ravenous whole swept hard upon them, seeking in its lustful course to devour its own children. Theirs was an agonized flight, but a braver existence than that of the rear flames, left to play shrinkingly up and down dead trees and old stumps, where the main fire had but bitten and leaped on — like jackals content to make a meal of the tiger's leavings.

Thus the wind and fire held high carnival on the ramparts of the valley that day, and returning in the late afternoon the men of the Draft found panel after panel of toilsomely laid fencing had been licked up, and much more in danger; and even little cabins in obscure hollows threatened, where the now dangerous woods flung its arms too closely about them. So, that instead of settling tiredly to their supper and minute descriptions of the court's proceedings, after their nine long miles to and from Wayside, the men went out in little black groups to match their strength against God's elements, as men have done from forgotten times, and as they will do to the end.

That night from the McClintic's farm on Peter's Ridge, whence one could see the Clear Creek Moun-

tains to the east, and in the west those of the Drupe range, with even a glimpse of the northern head of Peter's Ridge itself, watchers said "It looked like ther world was erfire." Mountains blazed in all directions; not as usual, with a single fiery serpent creeping its way over the hillside, with little scattered sparks and flames twinkling behind to mark its trail; here instead, on the racked sides of the Drupe Mountains particularly, whole acres flung up their crimson banners of smoke and flame. And where the fire had past on a thousand sparks lit the hillside as though a city lay out there in the dark.

The next day the smoke lay over the Jumping Creek Draft like a blue pall, so thick that objects scarcely fifty yards away were lost in it. It hung before, behind, and on each side, like an elusive curtain, and one longed to take hands and push away the soft oppression. The atmosphere was suffocatingly heavy, making the eyes burn, and the throat catch, and everywhere little dread black cinders floated silently down; while the sun shorn of its brightness hung a red ball in the sky.

With this obscuring mantle flung upon it, the valley seemed detached from the outside world, and shut in upon itself. And more than one man who was abroad that day, feeling himself imprisoned in the intangible blue walls, cast, every now and again, quick, furtive glances behind, remembering the evil presence which the valley still harboured, and the horror which had befallen Alderson Cree even in clear daylight.

At noon of that sombre day Judith Cree came out through the blue murk of smoke to the woodpile where David was at work, to call him to dinner. Her face had settled to the stricken look of the morning when they brought Alderson Cree home, but there showed now, as well, about her mouth a certain hard determination. An expression, which had perhaps, first manifested itself a few days after the burial of her husband, when many of the Cree and Leister connections had met to settle her affairs for her. In the minds of all it was a foregone conclusion that for her to a tempt carrying on the farm, with only children so young for help, was an impossibility; and her uncle, who had arrived from the Big Spring District, had come prepared to see to the renting of the place for her, and to offer a home to herself and the children, he being a widower, with a comfortable small farm and no woman to do for him. But to their wellarranged plans the Crees and Leisters found an unlooked-for check. Judith had ideas of her own, and the abandoning of the old Cree homestead, where had been passed all her married days, found no place among them. In vain did the gathering of her relations in consternation fling argument after argument against the bulwark of her determination; Judith met them all with the calmly repeated asseveration that she and David could manage with a little hired help now and again, and the assistance of the younger children who were already able to work a little. Through it all David stood valiantly beside her, his young eyes, like

the eyes of a faithful dog, lending her brave support. And when at length common sense had triumphed, and all her arguments were beaten down, Judith clinched the matter with a sudden burst of anger.

"An' ef yer all come here," she cried, "ter tell me thet cos Kip Ryerson killed Alderson, me an' my children's got ter be run out er our home too, all I've got ter say is that ther sooner you all git back ter attendin' ter yer own business ther better I'll be pleased — an' thet's my word!"

And with that she left them, and walking proudly into the back room shut herself sternly away from all the assembly. Looking into one another's faces the Crees and Leisters read their defeat, and one after another faded away to their own homes.

This crisis in her life had brought to Judith something new. Before, a woman all gentle yielding and placidity, she was become now one of a hard, almost a fierce determination. But it was a determination waked, not created, by her calamity; unguessed it had lain always at the back of her emotions, only heretofore there had been nothing to call it into being.

Watching her as she came across the yard toward him, David felt the change in her, with the flashing intuition possessed by some children; felt it, and childlike stored it in his mind as a fact, without fully knowing what it was nor whence it came.

As his mother reached him and started to speak, suddenly, looking past his shoulder, the words died on her lips, her eyes dilated, and in her throat was a low

sound of fear and loathing, as though she had seen a snake; and turning about without a word, she almost ran back into the house. David spun round to look. There, through the blue curtain of smoke, he made out Kip Ryerson ascending the hill beside the house, evidently returning to the sawmill after his noon meal. At the sight David dropped the axe he held, and, his whole small body stiffening with hate, he went swiftly into the house after his mother.

He found her where she had dropped down on a chair, looking white and shaken; and walking straight up to her he laid his rough little hand on her shoulder, a show of affection which was rare with him.

"He sha'n't never go by this house ergin, Mammy," he said in a low voice muffled by passion. "Not never ergin — I promise yer."

His wonderful dark eyes looked at her very young and full of tenderness, but about his mouth was a determined look that was years older.

That night Robert Reddin's fences were in danger, and many of the men of the Draft turned out to help him fight fire. With rakes and forked sticks they swept a path along all his line of fencing, down to old man Leatherbee's, where he and his three boys turned out to meet them, and carry the path around their own lines, and on until it safely joined the broad road leading to the farms on the top of Drupe Mountain; while the other men turned back along the path firing against the wild fire as they went.

The usual dark mystery of the mountain was changed

that night to a blaze of lurid smoke and flame, and its stillness was broken by the shouts of the men as they called scraps of news to one another over the crackle and roar of the fire; by halloos, or an occasional lilt of song, as when Orin Snyder, in his usual boisterous spirits, heralded his approach with a snatch of "Old Dan Tucker," shouted out at the top of his lungs.

"I be dogged ef it ain't ther finest show er fire I ever seed," he cried jovially. "An' I've seed this ole mountain lit up more'n onct."

"You oughtn't ter talk that kereless way erbout this here fire, Orin," Lloyd Johnson broke in, complainingly. "I take hit this is er erfliction ther Aimighty's sent down on this Draft. An' ef ther Lord's pleased ter send us erfliction hit don't seem right fer folks ter try ter git pleasure out er hit."

"Hit ain't no erfliction ter me yit," Snyder returned buoyantly, "hit ain't teched er rail er my fencin' so fer."

"Wal, now, there's jest ther difference," a voice struck in out of the near-by shadows, "hit's et up forty panel er Lloyd's back fence, so he natchelly thinks hit's an erfliction on ther whole Draft — or was hit ther whole world you said?" The voice paused in polite inquiry.

"Wal I'll be dogged ef here ain't George crep' out er his hole ter see what er little work looks like; reckon hit mus' be Groun' Hog day, sure 'nough," cried Snyder, whirling upon the shadows, which revealed the storekeeper seated placidly on a log. Hedrick had no

love for fighting fire, but the excitement had drawn away from the store all its usual evening assembly, and there was not left even one opponent at the checkerboard.

"A-haa!" he returned imperturbably to the circle of firelight directly in front of him; "take er right good look at me an' yer won't see nothin' mo' than er man tryin' ter bear erfliction like ther Lord would have him do."

"Reckon most fellers could bear this erfliction of they didn't hev er stick er timber, er panel er fencin', ter think erbout," Lloyd Johnson retorted, stung to peevishness.

Orin's simple reply was, "Oh, go ter H—l." Hedrick kicked his feet gently against the log.

"I never visits at er gentleman's house when that gentleman's erway from home," he returned sweetly and pointedly to Orin's remark.

Though up and down the fire-line the men shouted scraps of gossip and banter to one another, yet when they drew together in close knots the talk turned always on Kip Ryerson and his acquittal. For one cannot shout such things above the roar of flames, and besides, David might be somewhere in the shadow.

"Did yer fellers know Ed McAdams has took Kip back ter work at ther mill?" Hedrick inquired, rising from his log and emerging into the circle of light by Lloyd and Orin. Lloyd paused with uplifted rake.

"Is that er fact?" he said.

"I knowed hit," said Orin, "an' when I heered hit,

I'd ther biggest mind in ther world ter tell Ed that ef hit was murderers he was lookin' fer, ther wa'n't but one man in ther Draft was qualified ter work fer him."

"Well, whyn't yer do hit?" Hedrick inquired. Orin shook his head sadly and beat out a little tongue of flame that had assayed to leap the path.

"I didn't do hit," he said, "cos I knowed er feller with er wife an' family ter support couldn't efford ter be too smart."

"Looks like he oughtn't ter stay round here," Johnson ventured feebly.

"Looks like he's goin' ter jest ther same," Hedrick retorted, "less some er ther fellers don't git tergether an' let him know he ain't wanted in this deestrict no mo'."

"I wonder did he do hit?" Johnson speculated. Hedrick snorted.

"Do hit?" he cried. "I know he done hit, an' what's mo' every livin' soul in this Draft knows he done hit."

"Well, I wished he wouldn't er come back," said Johnson, still feebly. "Seems like after what's happened he'd orter stayed erway."

"Seems like ter me ther fellers orter make him stay erway," Hedrick muttered under his breath.

Men were wise when they dropped their voices in talking of Kip Ryerson, for fear David might be present somewhere in the stadows. Their guess was right, for early in the evaling saw him seated twenty

yards or so back of the firing line, watching the activity before him but taking no part in it. When he had first come he had been hailed by one of the small Reddin boys with "Git er forked stick an' come on help rake."

"How long will you all be out here?" David demanded.

"We's jest goin' ter rake round Pappy's fences down ter ole man Leatherbee's an' then fire, an' leave one er two fellers ter see hit don't break over. Reckon we'll be through by ten," the other answered, and one saw that the chief burden of affairs lay upon his young shoulders.

David turned off the path and dropped down on the soft leaves. Seated back there in the brush he watched the scene before him and waited his time. It was a weird sight. The dancing firelight, the voices all about, and the men's faces coming every now and then out of the gloom, and over everything the rosy pall of smoke. The fire the men had set burned slowly up the gentle slopes towards the wild fire, but up the steep ridges it raced and jumped, bounding from one overhanging bush to another, and roaring to meet its enemy the wild fire, and die in its fierce embrace.

Sitting back there apart from it all David experienced a strange feeling of aloofness, as though he were dead, and in spirit had come back for a moment to glance at the world and his old associates. He wondered suddenly if perhaps his father was not in truth doing just that. It was strange to think he might be

beside him in the shadow. Strange, but not terrifying, and as the thought came to him David clasped his hands involuntarily and whispered, "I won't fergit, Pappy, I've promised yer," dedicating himself anew to his oath.

As it neared ten o'clock and the men were gathering in groups preparatory to going home, David rose and crept to the head of the path, and a man raking carelessly there to make everything secure was startled by a pair of blazing eyes and a small white face which came out of the gloom.

"Why, hello, Davy!" he said in a voice a little shaken, for there was something sudden and unesual in the boy's appearance. David walked straight up to him.

"Will yer come down ter Mr. Reddin's hay barn in the near field, when yer git done here?" he demanded.

"What fer?"

"Fer ter bear something I've got ter tell yer all," David returned.

The man hesitated a moment, looking at him curiously.

"I reckon," he said at length, and, satisfied, David passed on down the path, bringing the same request to each man he came to. Some tried to argue and question him; some were half angry; and some, but these were only a few, laughed; but because of something in the boy's manner, and in view of the recent happenings, they one and all came down to the old hay barn, their lanterns swinging circles of light about

their legs, and the burning mountain at their back sending a faint glow after them.

David waited their coming in silence, seated on an abandoned piece of farm machinery. A strangely small and wistful little figure, the sight of whom caused more than one man a quick stab of pity.

When at length they were all there, he stepped from his perch and stood up before them.

That morning when he had stood by his mother and laid his hand upon her shoulder, there hat been a touch of his future manhood about him, but now—such is the fluctuation of childhood—faced by all those grown men, he seemed to have slipped back several years and showed curiously young and appealing, and George Hedrick, for one, caught himself whispering under his breath, "Po' little feller!"

He wore no hat, and his hair, damp from the night air. lay heavy and dark on his forehead, beneath which his black eyes burnt like sparks from the mountain fire. His face was colourless from emotion, and when he spoke his voice was a little uncertain and tremulous.

"I want ter tell yer all," he said simply, "that McAdams has took Kip Ryerson back ter work at ther mill."

The men were silent at his words, shuffling their feet and looking down; it was no news to most of them. David waited a moment, watching their impassive faces in surprise.

"He went by our house this mawnin'; my Mammy seen him," he said; surely that they would understand.

Still the men were silent. Suddenly it dawned us on him with an overwhelming astonishment that these men knew Kip Ryerson had been taken back at the mill—knew it, and had not raised one word in protest.

"Did you all know hit?" he said slowly, in bewilderment. "Did you know McAdams had took him back?"

There was such a hurt and stinging reproach in his voice, that none of the men found anything to reply, save Lloyd Johnson.

"Ther law says Kip ain't guilty," he was moved to venture in defense.

David caught his breath sharply and his eyes blazed. "You know he's guilty!" he riung back, his head up and nostrils quivering. And Orin Snyder was heard to mutter under his breath—"Ther law? H—I!!"

David regarded the still silent group a moment longer, half hopefully; then, as there was no response, a sudden white flame of anger leaped up in his face, and he beat his clinched fists hard together.

"Yer cowards!" he cried. "Every one er yer's cowards, cowards! Yer know Kip Ryerson killed my Pappy, what was a good friend ter all er yer. Stole up on him an' shot him in ther back. Yer know he done hit. Every one er yer knows he done hit! An' yit yer let him go on stayin' right here cos ther ain't one er yer's got ther sand ter run him out. Yer 'fraid er him! 'Fraid er him! Every one er yer's 'fraid er him, an' 'fraid er Ed McAdams, cos yer might lose yer

job at ther mill. Yer 'jraid! 'jraid! 'jraid!' he screamed, mad with passion, and beating his hands together at each word. "'Fraid! 'jraid! —" suddenly his voice broke in its shrillness, and choked away into silence. Panting he stood before them, a shaken little figure, swallowing hard, his eyes wide and bright with tears, and his breath coming in long quivers, and more than one man dropped his eyes, ashamed to stare at the child's bared emotion. For only a moment he stood thus, fighting down his tears, then with a hard-caught breath he took hold upon himself, and when at length he spoke again his voice was low and perfectly steady, and for a flash his soul looked out of his eyes.

"I'll be er man some day myself," he said simply, "an' then I'll not be askin' help of any of yer." And turning with his head high, and his hands still clinched, he went away into the dark, comforting arms of the night, a proud, defeated little figure.

For a space silence held the group of men, then with a quick, stern gesture George Hedrick pulled his hat hard down over his eyes.

"I'll not sleep ternight," he cried, "till ther Draft's clear er that devil!"

With a whoop Orin Snyder caught up his lantern, "I'm with yer!" he cried. "Dogged of I ain't, too," Robert Reddin cried; and inspired by these three, in a moment the men burst out of the shed like a wave, heading for McAdams's house, even Lloyd Johnson following in the rear. On the way they overtook

David, and Orin Snyder flung his great arm around the boy's neck and swept him on with the crowd. Arrived at McAdams's Robert Reddin and Orin went inside, and after a short delay brought out Kip Ryerson in a cursing fury of rage.

"What in H-ll der yer come here fer er draggin'

me out er my bed?" he screamed.

"We come here," said George Hedrick, stepping quietly up to him, "ter tell yer that this here little Draft ain't big ernough ter hold you an' us both, an' ther sooner you clear out er hit ther better fer you."

"Who's ter say so?" Ryerson cried defiantly.

Hedrick turned to the group at his back, and little man though he was, there was suddenly something superb about him.

"Who's ter say so?" he cried. "Fellers, step up

here an' let him see who's ter say so."

At his words the men surged forward out of the gloom, and spread up the steps and onto the porch of McAdams's house, holding up their lanterns so that the light fell on their determined faces. And as Ryerson recognized man after man he knew, the angry scarlet of his face fell to a sickly shade of grey.

"Now reckon yer see who's ter say so," Hedrick went on arrogantly. "An' reckon yer see hit ain't a lot er men hidin' behind masks an' skeered ter death. An' yer jest listen ter me, Kip Ryerson," he said, slowly, bringing his face close to the other's scared white one, "you git cleared outer here by tomorrer mawnin', er by termorrer night there'll be er place in

this Draft folks'll show where there was er lynchin' like they do over at Wayside, only this time hit'll be er white man an' not jest er nigger what was lynched."

At his words, backed by ejaculations of "Dogged ef that ain't so!" "That's right!" "A-ha-a!" "Now yer talkin'!" from the other men, a frightened shudder swept over Kip Ryerson, and he was silent.

"Now you've got our word," Hedrick concluded, "an' hit's jest like I tell you, an' yer'd better not stay round these parts studyin' on what we've said too long." Falling back from Ryerson, and followed by the others, he stepped off the porch, and in a few moments there was nothing left to tell of the visit save the disappearing twinkle of lanterns, the barking of the aroused dogs up and down the Draft, and in Kip Ryerson's heart a great fear.

David stole away home by himself, crying all the way, partly because he was unstrung, but chiefly because the sight of Ryerson rent him anew with an awful, sickening hatred. At home he crept to his mother's bedside and told her what had happened, and afterwards, when he was in his own bed, he heard her, for the first time since his father's death, weeping as though her heart would break.

After a long time of tossing wakefulness, with the blood pounding through his body in fever currents, David fell asleep to dream of a sheltered, sunny spot, shadowed slightly by autumn foliage; of the rushing sound of a deer's anguished flight with the dogs hard upon it; of the fleeing of some one through the under-

FIGHTING FIRE

brush; and of something appalling which he could not see, for it lay just out of his dream sight; and he woke himself crying again, "I won't fergit, Pappy! I won't fergit!"

That night a belated thunder-storm gathered itself toward morning and sweeping up the valley fell upon the suffering hillsides, in the glad relief of driven sheets of rain; and when next day the sun came up serenely, it looked upon mountains sapphire and topaz clear, freed from fire and smoke, with only here and there a smouldering stump, as evidence of what had been.

And Kip Ryerson was gone, no one knew where; and in the crystal atmosphere David drew a deep, free breath, and his spirit leaped up in a great relief.

CHAPTER V

ROBERT REDDIN PLANTS HIS CORN

TEN times, on its silent journey, the sun had stolen South, to set in cold winter skies of yellow and red at the notch on Hope's Nob; and now for the eleventh time was creeping North again, making for its summer goal Round Top of the Drupe Mountains, since that hunting day on Peter's Ridge when a single shot had set Alderson Cree so suddenly on an unknown pathway — apparently unknown, that is, though there is a chance that when he struck into it he found it all at once more familiar even than the one he had just left.

Ten years drifting over the Jumping Creek Draft had left little enough of change to mark their passage. Babies had been born; children had grown up; young people married and settled to homes of their own; and in the natural course of events a few old people had gone to see what had become of their contemporaries. A few families had moved into adjoining counties in the wake of some sawmill, and one or two had even gone West. The Jumping Creek had been bridged where it joins the North Fork; a wagon road cut over the Drupe Mountains down to the river, and now there

was even talk of a railroad to come within three miles of the Draft in the near future. On Peter's Ridge perhaps a few more fields stood out in cleared patches; and the velvet outline of foliage on the Drupe Mountains was also broken here and there by little farms; while from more and more hollows the deadly smoke of sawmills curled up in answer to the shrick of great logs, as the saw's teeth bit into them. Hideous monste , these mills, dwelling in bosky hollows amid the bracken, and sending forth a baleful breath of devastation over the surrounding country, like some terrifying dragon of old; while the ravished trees cry out for a St. George to deliver them.

The hum of the spinning-wheel is heard in fewer of the cabins, and the looms have almost all been relegated to the lofts. But on the whole these ten years have changed little in the Draft. George Hedrick, gone a trifle grey on the temples, and with a somewhat hunched-up stoop, still keeps the store at the crossroads, dispensing the necessities of life and the general gossip—its luxury—to all comers; and for the most part the little farms look across the valley at one another, with the same people toiling in their fields or moving in and out of the doorways of their dwellings, as of yore. Certainly the little stretch of meadow land that looks over the county road at the field opposite still belongs to the Crees, and the field it faces is Robert Reddin's as of old.

And in this same field, on a May morning, ten years and more since the funeral of Alderson Cree, Robert

Reddin, with most of his family to help him, went torth to plant his corn.

Seven o'clock of a May morning in the Jumping Creek Draft, and the brown earth following the plough-share!

Ye gods! what a world it is! With Heaven to look forward to, and every year a new earth at spring-time! For the senses, perfume and bird song, and tinkle of spring waters; garlanded fence rows, and mountains all a misty green; and for the heart a wild uplifting and a hidden singing.

All up and down the Draft that day, the bees and butterflies were dead drunk with perfume and honey, and blinded by the rainbow colours the shrubs and flowers put on for them. Such a wealth of bloom and ungathered honey distressed the bees exceedingly, and nightfall found more than one conscientious and exhausted rover down with nervous prostration. But the butterflies danced intoxicated reels all day long in the waves of perfumed heat, and cared not one jot how much store of honey went to waste so long as enough remained for their banqueting; nor what befell the world in general while there was perfume and sunshine left for them, with a cool green leaf to drop to sleep on when night put an end to their mad day of revelry. And the radiant blue sky bent over all, and smiled as tenderly on the wanton butterflies as on the bees; and laughed down at the absurd little shreds and patches of itself that the tiny brooks and ponds gave back. And for the sky's courtesy and smiles

the old earth sent up in return breaths of delicious perfumes, and every now and again a little bird messenger left its mating and nest building and flew up and up into the blue, with a song so bursting with delight of life and love that only the sky itself was big enough to hold it all.

"Nice corn-plantin' weather," Ellen Daw called out shyly to the Reddins, as she swung past their field on her rickety old horse, making for the mill. Let her words stand for the summing up of spring in the Jumping Creek Draft. "Nice corn-plantin' weather—" Heavens! to those who know, what a glad time of pure delight it is!

"Mary," said Bobbie Reddin, the youngest who took the field that day, a gentleman verging on eight years, who toiled faithfully after his sister, dropping soup beans where she dropped corn—"Mary, I seed Lucy drop pretty night en grains er corn in one hill, an' sted er stoppin' ter pick 'em out, she jest tromped 'em all in, so's nobody wouldn't see, an' went on."

Mary Reddin, from her slender height of eighteen years, smiled sweetly down at the little brother's scandalized face, but she made no reply, keeping on swiftly up the furrows, her delicate figure swaying over the uneven ground as graceful as a young sapling in the wind. The little brother's face did not lose its perturbed crease. At eight years old corn-planting is a matter of intense moment; at eighteen, on the contrary, there are other things which appear more important,

though afterwards the seriousness of corn-planting is again apt to reassert itself.

"I don't see why," he complained, "Pappy don't let me drop corn sted er—" with bitterness—"these yer ole beans. I'd do hit er heap sight better'n Lucy kin." He spoke with feeling, for in corn-planting, as in most things, there is preferment, and the bean pail to the young is a bitter degradation, it being the badge of extreme youth and incompetence.

"Mary," he persisted, "how old was you when Pappy let you commence droppin' corn? An' how long—"not stopping for an answer to his first question—"will hit be 'fore he lets me?"

Mary turned just long enough to hold up one small brown hand, measuring off half of her little finger with her thumb.

"I reckon hit'll be erbout so long," she said tantalizingly.

"Aw," he exclaimed, infinitely disgusted, for he had awaited her answer as breathle sly as the faithful of old awaited the answers of the oracles. "Aw pshaw! Mary, how long sure 'nough?"

Mary's face looked down at him mischievously from the pinky depths of her sunbonnet.

"When yer es strong es ther jay-bird was," she replied with a great solemnity.

"Aw," he repeated suspiciously. But his curiosity presently got the better of him and, "How strong was he, Mary?" he demanded.

"'Jay-bird pulled ther two horse plough,
Sparrer why not you?
Legs so long an' slimber,
I 'fraid er might break 'em in two!'"

Mary chanted gaily.

"Now, honey, you jest listen ter me," she went on.
"Jest say ter yerself, 'right foot, lef' foot, drop,' an'
take er step each time, an' ef yer jest step out big
ernough hit'll bring yer right ter ther hill every time,
an' hit's er charm'll git yer ter droppin' corn most
d'reckly."

The little brother looked at her in serious question a moment, then satisfied that her ir entions were good, he fell obediently to repeating the magic words under his breath. "Right foot, lef' foot, drop; lef' foot, right foot, drop," and in the depths of Mary's sunbonnet a little dimple looked out of her cheek an instant in triumph over the successful stemming of the youngster's flow of questions, which left her leisure to listen once more to a certain voice which came to her musically across the fragrant field, in the soft language of the plough — "Whoa — haw, haup! Gee! Gee! Whoa — haw!"

The voice was that of David Cree; and if any one had told Mary Reddin that her father's voice and that of her oldest brother Jack came over the field from their ploughs with just the same mellowed intonation as did David's, Mary would have found it hard to believe.

David had only come off the log drive, which the spring rains had brought down the river, the day before, and finding Robert Reddin short of a hand in his corn-field, had come over to put in a day's work for him. He had got home late the previous night, after the whole winter spent in camp, and starting in early on the corn-field he and Mary had found time to exchange hardly more than the usual greetings — though both knew there was much waiting to be said.

From the boy of twelve, David was shot up into a giant of a fellow of twenty-two. His face in its dark setting of hair was strong and open, and usually serenely untroubled, with the serenity of perfect physical health and strength. But there were times still when a sombre look crossed it, and when about his mouth and in his eyes there dwelt an expression which showed that he had felt more keenly the edge of life than have most young men of his age.

Physically he was perfect; and among the men of the neighbourhood he was accounted the strongest man all up and down the Draft, as his father had been before him. Even in the log camps where the strong men from several counties are drawn together, and where many trials of strength take place, he had not found any that were quite his match. There was something almost terrifying about his great strength. He felt it himself, and many of his movements showed a certain reserve as though he half feared to put forth his whole force. Once, in camp, angered by something David had said in jest, a man had suddenly drawn a

pistol upon him. For weeks afterwards David felt the curious gritty snap of the man's arm under his furious hands, and the choking leap of anger within himself he never forgot. It was the first time that he had ever really come face to face with the devil of passion and strength which lay within him. It was a subduing knowledge, and one that hept him out of many chance fights. Fights that most men would have gone into and come out of without anything more serious to show than a black eye and a few bruises. But David had come to know himself too well to dare to let his passion out ever so little.

From twelve years old to sixteen he lived a dedicated life, with one great object before him. He worked hard on the farm with the strength and determination of a boy much older, and when little snatches of leisure gave him opportunity he went to school. But always, in all his occupations, one great purpose was before him, and that purpose was the carrying out of the promise given his father. Sixteen, he set himself as the age at which he would be old enough to face Kip Ryerson, and his childish thoughts of his future always stopped short at that age, as at a blank wall; beyond that time he never thought or planned. This feeling, as though his life came to an end then, might have had, and perhaps would have had on many boys, a paralyzing effect. Fortunately for David the pressing need of the farm work for very daily existence was constantly present to spur him to activity, and when there chanced a respite from that, his eager mind drove him to school.

To some boys, too, there might have come a feeling of resentment against his father that he should have laid his own selfish revenge upon his young shoulders, but this thought never crossed David's mind. He had loved his father passionately, and his devotion held no hint of the possibility of the man's wrong-doing. Moreover, he and his father were cast along strangely similar lines, so that what the man did was almost always instinctively what the boy would have done also. Nor was there ever in David's mind a desire to evade his promise. When he had given his oath to his father he had given it in that moment with his very soul; and his father's death had clinched it.

When he came sixteen, in the hazy weather of November, touched by a certain chill of winter, he rose very early on the morning of his birthday, and packing himself some cold store of food and leaving a slip of paper for his mother, to say he had gone hunting and would not be back until the next day, he took his father's old rifle down from its rack on the big stone chimney, and crept out of the house long before it was light, or any one awake to be aware of his departure.

The first grey streaks of dawn found him almost at the Maple Spring. To pass the Maple Spring was one way to go to Rattle Snake Run. There was another which was slightly shorter, but on that morning David chose to go by way of the spring.

When he reached the lonely little hollow lying so breathlessly in the still woods of early dawn, he crossed

over to the log on which he and his father had sat together on that hunting morning four years before, and in the dull grey light, through which the trees and low bushes showed faint and cold, he dropped down on his knees and took off his hat.

"Pappy!" he whispered, "I promised yer, an' I'm goin' now. I promised yer an' I ain't never forgot, Pappy."

For a moment longer he knelt out there in the mysterious dip in the mountain side, where it seemed to him were only his father and himself of all the world. Then he rose and went over to the spring, and again the dried leaves crashed under his feet, and when he flung himself down at its edge to drink he had a strange feeling that the four intervening years had dropped from him, and that he was again but twelve years old, with his father sitting back there on the log, his eyes away on the distant mountains and his thoughts on Kip Ryerson; and as he put his lips to the water he seemed almost to hear the faint far-away cry of the dogs on the opposite ridge, and again to feel that sudden apprehension of something appalling about to happen. A curious sensation stole upon him as though there were no past or future, both being lost in one vast overwhelming present; for it was all infinitely strange and uncanny in the uncertain light, and the still loneliness of the woods

But in a moment he laid stern hold upon himself, and rising, stole out of the hollow and took his way along the path in the direction of the Rattle Snake Run.

He walked with the mountaineer's swinging stride, which carried him well over the ground, and he was already some distance on his journey before the sun came out in feeble rays that glinted faintly on the metal of his rifle, and cast a long, thin shadow of himself on the golden leaves. And as he went he had an ever-present feeling that this was his last day of life. His ideas of the law were hazy, and he did not know what would become of him after he had accomplished his intention, but imprisonment either in jail or reform school was to him as much death as actual hanging. Of his possible escape he thought little, and in fact he had made, strangely enough, no plans for it. He had a curiously detached feeling about himself, and his chief concern was simply the fulfilling of his promise. That was the great thing, and probably he would know at the time how to act in the face of the events which followed

It was a thirty-mile tramp to the Rattle Snake Run, and noon found the boy with still a weary distance before him. He stopped by a little brook, and drank deep, and ate some of his store of food; afterwards he rested for a time, and then looking carefully to the loading of his rifle took up his steady, swinging gait once more.

Occasionally he stopped to ask his way of people at work on the different small farms which he passed; and once or twice the road led him by small log schoolhouses, from the windows of which child faces watched him eagerly, glad of any outside diversion from the

monotony of study within. But for the most part his road was a lonely one, and sometimes for miles it lay through the mountains, where he met no one, and travelled only with his own thoughts for company. Once a strange cur attached itself to him for a short distance, and created a diversion by its wild and excited excursions into the undergrowth. But soon a startled rabbit led it with bounds and squeaks of delight far out of David's pathway, and again the boy went on alone.

About four in the afternoon, the path, which for some time had lain between steep and rock-slabbed mountains, opened out slightly into a long, gentle slope downward, and David guessed he was come to the head of Rattle Snake Run. Keeping on a little further, he presently espied a desolate-looking farm with a small grey cabin cocked on a grassy hillside in the middle of it.

He left the road and struck a narrow beaten path across a dried-up stream, which presently led him to the house. In the yard a shiftless-looking man was at work on a chicken-coop, while three unkempt women, two with babies in their arms, watched him with dull interest. As David approached, the dogs set up an excited barking and the man stopped his hammering and turned around. At sight of David he jerked his head in salutation but did not speak.

"Howdy," said David, "kin you tell me where erbouts in this Draft I would be likely ter find Kip Ryerson? I come over ter see him."

The man regarded him a moment longer in silence, then he said slowly:

"You'll hev ter travel er right smart farther than this Draft ef yer want ter find Kip Ryerson."

"How's that?" said David. I thought he lived over in here."

"He don't live nowhere no mo'," said the man, expectorating with deliberation, and turning back to his work. "He went out West two year ergo, an' word come las' summer that he got kilt in er railroad rick. Where mought you be from?" he inquired, turning around again with some show of interest.

"I come from over in Jumpin' Creek," David answered dully. He was stunned by the suddenness with which the possibility of carrying out his promise had been swept away from him.

"Ah-aa," said the man, "Kip Ryerson was over in ther fer er spell. We heerd he'd shot er feller ther—what was his name?"

"Alderson Cree," said David.

"And what mought your name be, stranger?" the man persisted.

"David Cree," the boy answered simply.

At his words the man looked at him quickly and at his rifle.

"An' you come over huntin' fer Kip Ryerson?" he said. "Lord!"

The tone roused David and brought him back somewhat to his surroundings, and with a muttered,

"Well, reckon I must be travelling," he left the yard, and struck into the road again, turning mechanically back over the way he had come.

For a couple of miles he walked in a sort of dream, bewildered by the abruptness with which his whole outlook had been changed. Then he collected himself somewhat, and taking out his supply of food he ate a few biscuits as he walked along debating where he should spend the night. He remembered having passed two dilapidated haystacks in one of the small fields at the head of the valley, and in them he decided to take shelter until the morning, for somehow he desired to be alone, and shrank from asking to be taken in at any of the cabins he had passed. In a short time, walking steadily up the valley, he came again to the haystacks, as the November night was closing down cold and still; wearily he clambered over the fence into the field, and pausing a moment shot the load from his rifle, with a curious feeling, as the echoes went rattling away among the mountains, that with the action a door had slammed suddenly between his past and his present. Then he burrowed a hole deep into the heart of one of the musty little stacks and crept in feet foremost, dragging the rifle after him out of the evening's damp. Twisting and turning, he made himself comfortable, and presently dropped his head upon one arm and lay still, and with his stillness a sense of his utter weariness swept over him. He was physically tired from his long tramp, but that was nothing to his mental prostration. He had not realized

what the strain of the day had been to him, but now, as mind and body relaxed, he felt as though the strain not only of that overwrought day, but of the four years since his promise, as well, came upon him all at once and engulfed him in an abyss of absolute exhaustion. For only a short time, however, he lay conscious of his fatigue, then slowly his mind became detached, and presently he drifted away into the soft blackness of deep sleep.

In the morning, when he awoke, he was stiff and cramped from his position, and his mind was still languid, but there was a refreshing vigour and glory in the air, and he dimly realized that his life was opening out before him, and was, as it were, given to him anew; his plans and forward thoughts need no longer end now with his sixteenth year.

He had tried faithfully to fulfil his oath, and the power to do so had been snatched from him, and he might now stretch forth his hands to take fearlessly the newness of life which had come to him.

Late in the afternoon he reached home. His mother was seated before the fire, and turned expectantly toward him at his entrance. Without greeting he stepped over to the mantelpiece and laid his father's rifle back upon its rack.

"Kip Ryerson's dead," he said quietly. His mother leaped to her feet and clutched his arm, looking into his face.

"No," he said, answering her look, for she had not spoken. "I ain't done hit. I went over ter do hit

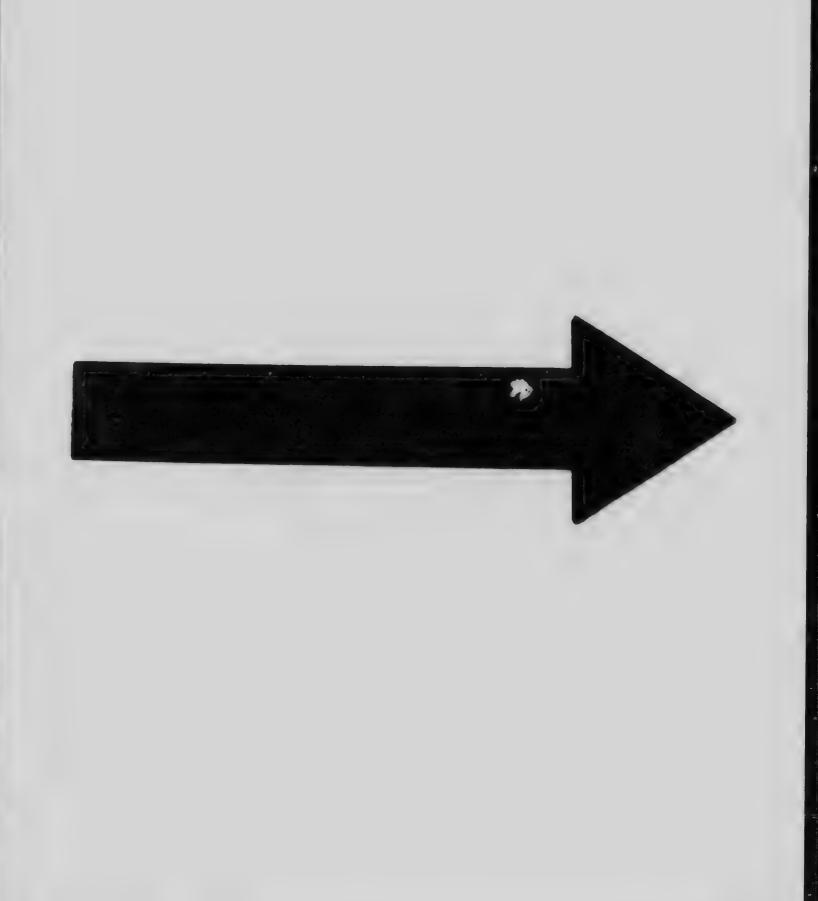
like I promised, but he went West and got kilt last summer in er railroad rick."

Slowly his mother's hands fell from his arm and she sank down again into her chair, but she made no comment on either his expedition or the news with which he had returned.

In the face of this frozen woman, that Judith Cree had become, it required an effort on David's part to call to mind what she had been in the days before his father's death; and the younger children knew her only as a pillar of strength and determination on whom they might entirely rely, but from whom all lightness and show of tenderness had vanished. And David knew that every struggle and burden of life that came upon them in the years after Alderson's death his mother laid to Kip Ryerson's door with a bitter accumulation of hate—though his name or that of her husband never crossed her lips.

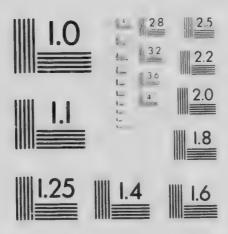
And the years had been hard, and at times almost past endurance, but thanks to Judith's indomitable will and David's energy they had managed always to pull through somehow, to the constant surprise of all the Crees and Leisters; and now were come to easy years, with David twenty-two, and the other boys almost grown and able to manage the farm while David worked in the log camps.

In the years that followed his sixteenth, David shook off much of the sombreness which the shock of his father's death had laid upon him, and being now able to look into the future, he found life and its possibilities

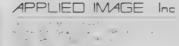


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very pleasant; and at twenty-one or so, looking about him, he found that for him Mary Reddin was growing up to be quite the most attractive possibility which his life held.

At dinner time, in the corn-field that May morning, Robert Reddin looked back with satisfaction over more than half of his brown field in which the secret treasure of golden grains and white beans were safely hidden; and when the soft grey-blue note of the dinner horn came pleasantly across from the house, he gave quite a jovial halloo in response, and shouted to his gang of planters to knock off.

Bobbie, the youngest Reddin, looked into the depths of his bean pail with a long-drawn sigh of satisfaction It had been filled three times, and self-congratulation. and for the fourth time the beans were beginning to look sparse in the bottom, with the black tin of the pail showing between their fat, white sides; and the youngest Reddin felt that he had served a faithful apprenticeship in beans, and might safely hope for a glorious promotion to corn in the near future. Unfortunately, he delayed too long over the sweets of self-congratulation and the dear thought of future greatness, for when he took his tow-coloured head out of the bean pail he saw with a pang of dismay that already the three next older Reddins had pre-empted the plough horses, and with clanking harness and flving elbows were plunging gaily across the fields toward home and dinner. At the sight, with piercing howls, he of the future greatness flung himself over the furrows in mad

pursuit; albeit his bare feet flashed somewhat timorously over the hidden stones, for they had not long been turned out of their protection of shoes and stockings, and their tender whiteness bore little resemblance to the brown and brier-scratched pair which had gone into winter retirement the previous October.

It is a hard world, and the bitterness of it came home that morning to the youngest Reddin; and with what breath he could spare from running he complained to high heaven of the wickedness of mankind in general and of the three next older Reddins in particular. High heaven smiled sweetly down upon his lamentations and lost no whit of its gay serenity; and I am inclined to think that in all probability it was not the first time it had been called upon to notice the perfidy of mankind. But if heaven turned a deaf ear, Marv, who was a nearer providence, strolling lightly across the field with David, heard the sounds of woe and And David, drawing on his own young experiences, took in the situation at a glance, and with a quick movement laid hold upon one of the careering horses and brought its reluctant rider to a standstill.

"Now ain't you 'shamed ter run erway from er little feller like that?" Mary said severely to the giggling rider.

"Come on, honey," she called to the injured one, "an' I'll put yer up."

The youngest Reddin arrived, red-faced and out of breath, but keenly alive to his wrongs.

"They'd oughtn't ter treat me that erway, ought they, Mary?" he appealed.

"That they oughtn't," she answered, consolingly, bending over him sweetly, though at the back of her eyes there was a spark of laughter.

But Bobbie failed to catch the laughter, and satisfied that his cause was championed he cast a triumphant look at his brother, his face already beginning to clear. And when David swung him up to a place on the back of the much enduring horse, he curled his toes joyously, and drawing a quivering breath or two burst into a sunshine of smiles, once more well pleased with the world; though it must be admitted he laid hold upon his brother with somewhat ungentle hands, accompanied by a pinch or two and an excursionary finger up and down the ribs, which occasioned howls and squirms from his victim, and cries of "Aw, quit now." But in the face of what had happened, and when only one thickness of cotton shirt lies between revengeful fingers and the bare skin, not to tickle or pinch was more than could be expected of poor frail human nature.

In the wake of the riders, David and Mary went on their way again across the field. Mary had pushed her pinky sunbonnet with its white ruffles back off her head, leaving it to hang from her neck by its strings. For sunbonnets are the creations of the middle-aged, who find nothing particularly interesting outside of themselves, and are to the young, who care to see and hear, the very invention of the evil one. Therefore, now that there were other things to see

besides the long brown furrow studded with yellow corn grains, Mary thrust her sweet face out of her sunbonnet's gloom, daring the sun and wind to do their worst; feeling, as she emerged, as though she had suddenly entered a new world of light and vivacity, like a butterfly bursting from its chrysalis.

Mary was the acknowledged beauty of the Draft. In the words of Joe Snyder, Mary Reddin "was jest that pretty hit kinder hurt yer eyes ter look at her"; and he voiced the sentiment of most of the young fellows of the Draft. For there was, in truth, something about the purity and sparkle of the girl's face that was almost dazzling.

Her whole physical makeup was slender, though she was tall, and strong, too, with a delicate supple strength that adapted itself easily enough to all her daily tasks. Her hair was a misty yellow, and swept back from her forehead in little curls and arches, as though each strard half turned to catch another glimpse over its shoulder of the beauty of her face. Her eyes, strangely enough in that fair setting, were very dark, and usually they flashed with an illusive humorous light, matched by the curve of her mouth; but there were times, too, when they took on a mysterious softness, and then, as well, the mouth matched them in tenderness, and at these times Mary Reddin was irresistible.

Looking at her beside him that heavenly May day, David, who had not seen her for six long months, felt his heart leap up within him, and with a sudden surge

of tenderness he longed — but there! What under the sun was the use of longing for anything, with a younger sister all eyes, and an older brother all facetiousness, and a father, trailing over the field beside them, and making silly, trivial remarks about the weather, and who had their corn in and who hadn't? In the face of so many spectators David had to content himself with helping Mary carefully across the little streams and over all the fences. As he jumped her across the last fence, and she came to the ground with airy grace, Mary, who daily climbed these same fences and skipped across these streams unaided, turned to him with mischief in her eyes.

"I certainly am erbliged ter yer, David," she said demurely. "I dunno's I'd ever er got home without yer help."

At her words Jack Reddin and the younger sister tittered, and flushing hotly David turned a quick look on her, but in the depths of her eyes he read a tenderness beneath the mockery which the others failed to see, and which somehow for him took all the sting out of her words.

"Aw Mary," he said deprecatingly; and then added in a whisper, "I'm lookin' fer ther time when I'll be at hand ter help yer over all ther hard places."

But Mary was in a provoking mood.

"What was hit yer said?" she asked, with tantalizing politeness. "I didn't quite ketch hit. Say hit ter Jack, my sunbonnet ruffles tickles my years so's I can't hear nothin' hardly."

"Never mind," said David with a meaning that silenced her; "I'll wait an' say hit ergin ter yer when I kin say hit loud ernough ter make yer hear me sure 'nough."

As Mary stepped on to the little porch of the Reddins' house, she paused a moment before entering to pat the old hound that lay contentedly stretched in the sunlight. He thumped his tail heavily against the boards and smiled idiotically up at her in response, and having assured him of her good-will, she passed on into the house with David beside her. At her entrance the baby, who was seated upon a quilt on the floor, and surrounded by a miscellaneous collection of playthings, among which a small hammer and an old cowbell ran a neck-and-neck race for the place of favourite, set up a howl and waved his fat arms to be taken up. Mrs. Reddin, warm but smiling, came in from the kitchen and shook hands with David.

"I'm mighty glad ter see yer back, Dave," she said, cordially, "yer bin well?"

David assured her that he had.

"Well, I'm glad ter hear hit," she returned. "I heerd ther was er heap er sickness in camp this year. Ain't hit awful warm?" she went on, gasping slightly with the remembrance of her steaming kitchen. She was a large, fair woman with a serene countenance and the remains of a good deal of beauty. From her Mary inherited her regular features, but the girl's face was touched with an individuality and poetry lacking in the older woman's; or perhaps her face had once

had it, and the care of a husband and eleven children, to say nothing of every year's crop of chickens, and abandoned lambs, had transformed the poetry into a general large-hearted motherliness — on the whole a very good middle-aged substitute for poetry.

"I jest wished you'd take that young un over ter ther corn-field an' keep him there, he's pretty nigh run me distracted this mawnin'," she said to Mary as the

latter picked the baby up from the floor.

"What makes hit so bad?" Mary inquired of the baby with pretended severity. But the baby, undisturbed by its reputation for wickedness, smiled serenely in a large and comprehensive manner in which a few

newly arrived teeth figured prominently.

"Why, hit's got another tooth," Mary exclaimed, rubbing a slender, inquiring finger along the expansive gums. Be it known that all the babies of the Draft are "it," irrespective of name or sex, until they are dispossessed of the title by the arrival of another sister or brother, upon which they are promoted to the dignity of their own names which have been awaiting them; while the new arrival, slipping into the promoted one's rights and privileges, not to mention certain of its discarded clothes, begins its own lordly reign of "it."

"See me chop," a small voice made itself energetically heard at Mary's feet, and a young person, still in dresses, and but shortly dispossessed of the baby title, came down with gusto upon a small stick of wood, with a long-handled hatchet, perilously near his own bare foot. His mother regarded him calmly.

"You cut yer toe off," she remarked mildly, explaining the situation to him. But Mary, with a fine show of discipline, swooped down and deprived him of the hatchet, making at the same time such an enchantingly grotesque face, and giving him a series of such irresistible pokes in the ribs, that he immediately collapsed upon the floor limp with delight, and it was several minutes before he realized that she had robbed him of his dearest possession; and fortunately, at the moment of his discovery, his thoughts were happily diverted by the arrival of his father and older brother from the stable where they had gone to feed the horses — upon which every one tramped hungrily out to dinner.

At dinner Mary and her mother did not sit down with the others, but busied themselves waiting upon the rest, and as David watched Mary's slender figure moving about the table serving her small brothers, in his mind's eyes all the brothers and sisters, and even Mr. and Mrs. Reddin, were suddenly swept away, and at the table he and Mary sat, facing each other alone, with no one else in all the world to bother about.

"An' how was ther drive this spring?" Robert Reddin asked, taking a deep draught of coffee, and settling to minute inquiries of timber, river, ark, and hands; and with an inward sigh David saw his dream-table disappear and resigned himself to the patient answering of innumerable questions.

CHAPTER VI

A YOUNG MAN'S FANCY

It was hard for David Cree to turn his mind from the vision of that delightful dream-table, where only himself and Mary Reddin sat, and give his attention to her father's endless questions; all the harder, because when his mind went wandering off along those primrose paths of romance his heart kept it joyful company, whereas, when he turned it to the matter of log drives, that always unaccountable member suddenly refused to follow there, but stayed instead like a runaway child, playing by itself among the primroses, and giving little absurd bounds of pure delight every time Mary's voice or her low ripple of laughter cut across Robert Reddin's conversation. Nevertheless, David answered the questions faithfully, and late in the afternoon of that planting day he had his reward.

It was almost six o'clock before the last yellow corn grains were laid snugly in their furrows, and the coverlet of brown earth rippled over them, to lie so lightly upon them, and, with the sun and quickening spring rains, to whisper to the little seeds such strange, unbelievable prophecies of green blade, golden dusted tassels, and

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final glad fulfilment of the ripe ear. Such obviously strange and unbelievable prophecies that more than once, in the days that followed, the little grains wished petulantly that the warm breath of the earth, and the whisper of the rains, would cease tantalizing them with such haunting impossibilities, and let them lie quiet in the ground in their half-asleep existence, which surely was the only thing that corn grains had ever been intended for. But that mysterious and disturbing whisper of the earth and rain went on in spite of their fretful desire to be let alone; and finally, just to escape a little further from the rain's teasing, the grains shifted uneasily, and then sent forth little pale, groping rootlets to burrow away deeper into the dark. But with the roots that sought thus to escape there came out, too, tiny buds of things that said, "Perhaps the earth and rain spoke true after all - perhaps," turning it over within themselves - and again - "perhaps." when the little buds went as far as to admit a perhaps, it was not many days before a green army of fairy banners leaped into the sunshine of Robert Reddin's brown field.

But before that wave of greenery arrived, a good many things had happened in the Jumping Creek Draft; and the thing which happened first of all was that Mrs. Reddin's spotted heifer pushed down the fence at the edge of the woods, and sought to run away into the hollows of Drupe Mountain, prompted thereto by the irresistible spring hunger for budding juicy things. Mary was the first to see her manœuvre

as she stood in the group of congratulatory Reddins at the upper end of the finished field.

"There's Spotty tryin' ter break erway ergin," she exclaimed; "ef I don't git her turned back she'll not come in 'fore mornin'"; and so saying she sped swiftly after the delinquent heifer.

"I'll help yer!" David cried, and without a moment's hesitation raced after her slender, flying figure; and the further away from the general assembly of the Reddin family that Spotty led her pursuers, David Cree felt in his heart the better would he be pleased.

Though a spring day in the Jumping Creek may have been breathlessly hot through the noon hours, there comes always with the falling of the evening a grateful cool wave of energy that puts fresh inspiration into the air and makes one feel, even with a long day's work at the back, a mad desire for more physical exertion.

That freshness had touched the air now, and Mary ran with pink cheeks and the glad joy of swift motion in her eyes; and David, a half minute behind her, put forth more than his usual energy before he finally overtook her.

Mary threw him a laughing, radiant glance over her shoulder, but she did not check her speed until the steep rise of the hill, as it sprung from the valley up into the Drupe Mountain, forced her to do so, out of breath. Here she dropped to a walk, but it was not a slow one, and, "We gotter hurry er she'll git clean erway," she panted breathlessly to David. "You jest

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wait here," David commanded, as they came to the broken-down fence. "Yer all outer breath an' I'll git ther ole raskil turned 'round in er second'; and so saying he plunged into the waving undergrowth, and in a few minutes, accompanied by much shouting and trampling, Spotty broke out of the woods, and with many awkward and defiant gambols, high-flung hind legs, and stiffly quirked tail, went plunging away down the hill toward the stable and the other cattle, who had cautiously awaited the result of her manœuvre before attempting it themselves, and who now, on her ignominious return, doubtless congratulated themselves mightily upon their conservative stay-at-home attitude.

David came back in triumph to the fence where Mary waited. From where they stood the valley lay below them in the slant rays of afternoon sunlight, all golden brown with upturned earth, save where the spring wheat and pasture lands made spots of mellowed green.

Cheek by jowl below them the Reddin and Cree farms lay looking at each other across the county road; and in the air was that heavenly inspiration of evening coolness. David came close up to Mary Reddin.

"I've turned yer heifer back fer yer, an' now what are yer goin' ter do fer me?" he demanded softly.

Mary looked at him with round eyes of innocence.

"O Dave!" she said, "I certainly am erbliged ter yer, an' I'm goin' ter do er heap fer yer."

"What is hit yer goin' ter do?" he persisted.

Mary swooped away from him with a quick, butterfly movement, and caught up the lower rail of the fence. "I'm er goin' ter let yer help me lay up this fence," she answered, with a saucy look at him, and an enchanting gurgle of irrepressible laughter.

David laughed, too, in spite of his defeat; and joyous dancing lights flashed in his dark eyes, answering the

witchery of her own.

"All right, Mistress Mary," he said; "but mind, hit don't take very long ter lay up er fence, an' then there'll hev ter be ernother settlin'," he added with meaning.

In truth, judging from the way in which he fell to work, it would not take long, and Mary, as she watched him, felt a sudden little half fearful thrill go over her.

She knew very well that David loved her, and had done so for more than a year; but in all that time she had managed by her quick wit to hold him off, so that he had never actually woodd her. Why she thus fenced with him Mary hardly knew herself, for in her own heart she was very well aware that she loved him. But it was all such a strange new feeling, that somehow it prompted her always to put up quick, defensive barriers of speech whenever they were alone together.

And David had let himself be held off, for he had had nothing to offer her. But now, after a long winter of scrupulous saving in camp, things were different; and watching his determined face, as he toiled over the fence, Mary realized all at once that he was no longer to be baffled, and with the realization she felt

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herself shaken softly like a spring leaf shivering in the April winds.

And even as she watched him, David laid the top rail upon the fence and turning suddenly caught both her hands in his.

For a long moment he looked down at her in silence, and Mary's eyes fell before his.

"Mary," he said at length, softly, "do you know why I come outer camp?"

At the question Mary's old quick wit rose to the defence, and though she knew it was no good now, she nevertheless flung out a laughing retort.

"Reckon yer come out 'cause everybody else did, and it'd be kind er lonesome out there in the mountains all by yerself," she said.

David laughed tenderly, but with a ring of exultation.

"No, that wa'n't ther reason," he answered. "'Sides, everybody didn't come out. There's er cuttin' crew up in ther yit; an' I could er stayed with them ef I'd er wanted ter. But I had er reason fer comin' out an' you know what hit is."

"'Deed ef I do," she answered quickly.

"Then I'll hev ter tell yer!" David cried, with a sudden nearer movement toward her.

Mary sprang back, and tugged to get her hands free.

"I ain't got no time ter listen ter yer — that's Mammy now, calling ther cows," she cried breathlessly.

But David held her fast. "Yer'll not go till I tell yer," he said, in a low, passionate voice, and all at

once he caught her in his arms and covered her face with kisses.

"Now do yer know!" he cried, panting. "Now do yer know?" Mary struggled in his embrace, half frightened.

"Oh, let me go, let me go, David Cree," she cried.

"Not till yer say yer know why I come outer camp," he answered hotly.

"Oh, I do! I do!" she gasped at length, lying still in his arms and almost sobbing.

And with one last kiss David opened his arms and let her go, and Mary skimmed down the hillside toward home like a frightened bird.

Yet, when she reached the house and stepped across the porch, the frightened look had left her face and another expression was there.

David stood still, leaning against the fence, and watched her dainty figure leap down the hillside and disappear from sight, and only one other thing in all his life had ever so moved the very foundations of his soul as had the sudden overpowering rush of his love, and the touch of Mary's little fluttering figure, that had at length lain still in his arms—and the other thing that had moved him had not been love.

Shaken and awed, he stood looking down upon the mellowed landscape below him, his heart leaping in great bounds and all his pulses on fire. And in the face of his own strength of passion he paused in wonderment and almost in fear. That he could hate deeply, circumstances had shown him. But what the

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power of love was he had not guessed until that moment. His was not a subtle nature, nor one given to inward speculation, but in that moment he realized that he had come face to face with a hitherto unguessed flood of emotion and strength, bursting open, as it were, the doors of a new universe.

He turned at length from his position by the fence, and coming slowly down the hill skirted the Reddins' field and made across the bottom lands toward his own home.

As he swung himself over the last fence and dropped into the county road, he met Ellen Daw, on her slow return from her day spent at the grist mill at Linden—the little post-office village some five miles from the head of the Jumping Creek Draft.

In the light of his great knowledge all women seemed to David, just then, beings set apart and exalted, sanctified by his love for one. Therefore, he stopped and spoke to Ellen with extra politeness, though as a rule the girl's wistful, dark visage, with its eager look — as though she searched every face anew, with a fresh upspringing of hope for a thing that she had somehow missed — did not particularly attract him.

"Howdy, Miss Ellen," he said, putting out his hand to her as she sat above him on her old horse, her bag of milling swung at the back of her saddle.

With a quick gesture the girl pushed her rusty black sunbonnet off her head that she might see the better, and then dropped her work hardened hand into his

outstretched one with a certain shy awkwardness; while a slow, dark colour went all over her face.

"Howdy," she said, briefly; and it seemed as though it was hard for her to say even that.

"How you bin makin' hit?" David persisted.

"Oh, jest tolerble," she answered.

"How's yer Paw?" he inquired.

"He's so crippled up with ther rheumatiz this spring that he ain't able ter do er lick er work," she answered, still with the same constrained manner. Then she added in a lower tone, as though to herself, "Hit keeps me right hard worked."

A sudden realization of how hard worked a lonely girl might be on the top of Drupe Mountain, with two disabled old people to look after, flashed over David in the light of his own past struggles, and he answered her low words warmly.

"I jest bet hit is hard," he said, a touch of sympathy in his voice that brought a quick mist to the girl's eyes and a tightening to her throat. She fumbled with her reins a little blindly.

"Well, reckon I must be travellin'," she murmured, confusedly; but she paused a moment longer, looking searchingly down into his face.

"You bin well?" she inquired, and another man might have noticed a certain eagerness that underlay the constraint of her manner. But David missed the eagerness, and was aware only of the constraint, which threw something of awkwardness into his own reply.

"Oh, yes, well's common," he answered; and was

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glad that with that she again gathered up her reins, and with a couple of jerks got her horse once more started in its shuffling, uneven gait.

For a moment David watched her go slowly up the road, her figure in its forlornly faded calico swaying slightly from side to side as the old mare rolled along, and in his neart he was conscious of a vague pity for the gir.

But directly the realization of his own wonderful new happiness swept back upon him, and throwing his head up he poured forth a soft, sweet whistle of pure ecstasy, swinging along at a jubilant pace through the delicate perfumed light of the vanishing day; and Ellen Daw and her hardships speedily vanished into the background of his mind.

As he neared home his little sister Ellie, the blue-eyed baby of ten years ago, with flying hair shining about her head in a red-gold haze as the last rays of sunlight touched it, came racing down the hill to meet him.

"O Dave, Dave!" she cried, landing in his outstretched arms, and quite breathless; "I've found the ole white turkey's nest! She's settin' on eight eggs; an' Mammy ses I kin hev half er all ther turkeys she raises fer findin' ther nest."

"Well, I declar!" cried David, with proper admiration; "ain't you er smart girl?" And stooping he caught her up and set her lightly on his shoulder, and with her arm 'round his neck, and both her slender, bare ankles clasped in one of his hands, he proceeded gaily up the slope to the house.

This little sister was grown into an airy witch of a thing, all dancing vivacity and gay unconsciousness; with little elfish turns of speech and gesture which were a constant source of wonder and fascination to the other children of the Draft.

Slipping from David's shoulder at the house she landed upon her restless bare feet like a bit of blown milkweed down, and in a moment was off to the barn on some other eager quest; for she flitted from one delightful pursuit to another, like a swallow swooping and darting through grey evening skies, now in this direction, now in that.

David watched her go with a smile, for she was the pet of all her brothers; then striking once more into his gay whistle, he passed through the main room of the house and out to the kitchen lean-to at the back, where he found his mother busy getting supper.

At his entrance she glanced up from her kneadingboard, in greeting, but she did not speak, for her words now were always few.

Her face still wore the expression it had caught, when, ten years ago Alderson Cree had been brought home from his last hunt. The face was old now, wrinkled and vorn by the past hard years, but the look stayed always new, with a freshness of horror, as though the blow had fallen but the day before.

Used as David was to that live tragedy, it came to him that afternoon, in the face of his new happiness, with a reawakening of distress, as though a phantom out of the grim past had risen suddenly to mock him;

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and with a sense that the sunlight of his happiness had been suddenly blighted by a cloud, he caught the tin wash basin from its nail on the wall, and turned out to the well, to make his evening ablutions, with a restless feeling almost of irritation toward his mother.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE BACKWATERS OF LIFE

WITH the remembrance of her meeting with David Cree still warmly fresh in her mind, Ellen Daw rode slowly on her homeward way, following the main road of the Draft, as it meandered through the ever narrowing valley, between zig-zag fence rows, burdened with clouds of tender green leaf, white blossom of thorn, and ethereal pink of the crab-apple. The road ran between the small farms and cleared hillsides of the valley; and from the occasional dooryards neighbours called greetings to her as they went about their evening chores; and every now and then she met some of the men on the road making their way homeward, and exchanged a constrained "Howdy" with them, or remark upon the weather. Hal -way up th Draft she passed the schoolhouse, a little square building of grey logs and white strips of chinking and daubing, now, in the idleness of spring and oncoming summer, standing deserted and silent on its grassy knoll; brooding, perhaps, on past and gone sessions, with only an occasional Sunday prayer-meeting, or preaching, to break its peaceful monotony. Ellen half wondered to herself, as she passed it, whether in its dreams of different

children whom it had hovered, it ever remembered a shy little gipsy-like child from off Drupe Mountain, who for three winters had daily trudged the weary miles from the top of the mountain to its door; and who had suffered such agonies of ridicule at the hands of the other children, all because her clothes were shabbier and poorer than anyone's else, and because she sometimes had only corn bread for her dinner. Ellen hoped the schoolhouse had forgotten, and all the scholars as well, that pitiful little figure of herself. She could never forget it; but she could not bear to think that others still remembered her forlorn, unmothered childhood. For she felt always an aching pity for that thin little wistful child-self, and wished that it were possible now, in her grown-up capacity, to take the phantom of herself of ten years ago into her empty arms, and give it the passionate caresses that a mother would give - caresses that neither she nor the child-self had ever known; only some warm encompassing affection like that, she felt, would ever take the sting out of those cruel school days.

A little past the schoolhouse, Kate Sawyer, milking her cow, of a beautiful Titian red colouring, in a fence corner of the road, stopped Ellen with a request.

"Ef yer see my ole sow up erlong ther head er ther Draft, wished you'd give her er turn back this erway. She broke loose this mornin' an' I'm mighty 'fraid she'll git erway out inter ther mountains," she said. "Soh — there! — back-er-leg!" she adjured the cow; and presently the soft purr of the milk frothing into

the bucket went on as before. And with a "Yes'm, I will," Ellen, eagerly glad of any opportunity to be neighbourly, rode on her way again.

The sun had dropped behind the Drupe Range in so clear a spring sky of turquoise, shading to yellow, that there were no littlest clouds even, to fling out banners of colour at its departure; the mountains drew in steeper and closer on either side of the track; frogs chorused from all the little streams and moist places in the fields, and the day seemed vanishing in long drawn breaths of fainter and fainter light; and in all the world only God knew what a lonesome heart Ellen Daw carried with her on her homeward way—and in truth on all her ways through the world.

A short distance past the Ford place, which was the last inhabited house in the Draft, Ellen overtook Kate Sawyer's delinquent sow, wallowing with luxurious abandonment in a capacious mud hole, and with shouts and flourishes of her maple switch got the fat old lady to her feet and started her grunting and scuttling down the road toward home and an anxious mistress. And with a glow of satisfaction, and something of a feeling of friendship with Kate Sawyer, at least, Ellen proceeded on her way. For to even the lonesomest is given the privilege of doing little bits of kindness for others, which gives some slight feeling of being in touch with the rest of mankind. To one who has had all his or her life endless store of friendship and love, this might seem a meagre enough taste of

good fellowship; but to one who, like Ellen Daw, had known real loneliness, it was unspeakably better than nothing, and was, in fact, the way by which she obtained most of her feelings of companionship with her neighbours. There was scarcely a person in all the Jumping Creek Draft who had not at one time or another received some little hidden bit of help from the lonesome dark girl, who lived such a dreary, shutaway life on the mountain, and who possessed such a meagre portion of either the thoughts or hearts of the neighbours whom she so eagerly sought to help with her little sceret kindnesses.

If she had done any one a service that person never knew it, for she concealed the fact with a diffident reserve; and if she longed with her very heart are soul for the merry companionship of the young people of her own age, or even for the quieter but no less dear friendliness of the older people, no one ever guessed that either. For, born on the top of a lone-some mountain, and living almost from the day of her birth a solitary, unloved life, the girl had developed a constrained reserve that shut her away from all human fellowship more effectually than even the inaccessibility of the mountain itself.

Though she saw and heard and felt like other people, her shyness held her tongue in a fatal silence. When people spoke to her gaily or pleasantly, her whole heart leaped toward them in warm response, and she would have given worlds to answer in kind, but always the blank wall of her reserve and self-consciousness rose

up between, and her responses came only in difficult sentences or monosyllables.

"I dunno how 'tis," Kate Sawyer remarked to her neighbour and intimate, Allie Snyder, "but somehow every time I see Ellen Daw, from off Drupe Mountain, seems like she's more froze up 'an ever. I try ter talk ter her, an' give her er pleasant word, but she jest drops her eyes an' says' No'm,' er' Yes'm,' an' seems like she'd es leave I'd take er stick ter her es speak ter her."

"Well, she jest freezes me right up," Mrs. Synder declared with large frankness, changing Orin Snyder's smallest son and heir from one hip to the other, and putting up a frowzy lock with her disengaged hand.

"An' I can't say es ther's many makes me feel that erway," and thereat she laughed with a mountainous joviality which shook her all over, and gave to the baby a foretaste of what an earthquake might be.

"Don't seem like none er ther girls er ther Draft takes up with her neither," Mrs. Sawyer went on, tentatively.

"That's so, they don't," agreed Mrs. Snyder. "I tried ter git Lucy ter go an' set by her when she comes down ter preachin', but she says Ellen's so currus an' dumb, an' wears such funny clothes, don't none er ther girls want ter hev nothin' ter do with her."

"Well, she may be dumb when hit comes ter talkin', but tell yer *one* thing, she kin ever more lastingly outsing anything in this yere Draft," the other declared. "An' she ain't really so bad lookin' when yer come ter study her, sure 'nough. Ef she didn't wear such currus

clothes an' didn't look so dark an' kinder skeered, she'd be as good lookin' as most anybody."

So ran the general opinion of Ellen Daw among the Draft people whenever they took the trouble to have an opinion at all about her, which, in truth, was only at rare intervals when a dearth of more interesting gossip turned their thoughts upon those who dwelt in the backwaters of life; for even the Draft has its backwaters, where existence seems almost at a standstill, and where personalities stagnate, or develop, in their lonesome aloofness, unlooked for and unnatural traits.

And in these backwaters Ellen Daw had lived her whole life of twenty-two years, without ever knowing what it was to have any living soul care for her, or worse still, without ever having come in contact with anyone, man, woman, or child, who desired any of the store of affection which she was so eager yet so fearful to give.

At her birth her mother had died, and her father handing Ellen, the only child, over to Silas Daw and his wife, for adoption, had sold his small farm on Drupe Mountain, and moved away into the mining district of West Virginia, where he shortly married again; and in the vicissitudes of supporting a steadily increasing family, probably forgot, or certainly did not care to remember, the existence of his other child in the Jumping Creek neighbourhood.

The brief episode of her own home life closed, Ellen grew up as Ellen Daw, and most people forgot that she was an adopted child. Others forgot it, but as

soon as Ellen grew old enough to know what it meant it never slipped from her mind. The Daws had no children of their own, and Ellen might have found a small store of affection in Mrs. Daw's heart in the place of her three little dead children that disease and accident had ravished from her, one after the other; but, unfortunately, when Ellen was still very small, Mrs. Daw received a severe fall from which she was long in recovering, and which left her, when she was once more able to be about, physically strong, but mentally almost idiotic. And by Silas Daw's sister, who came to take charge of things about the house on Mrs. Daw's being incapacitated, Ellen was constantly reminded of the fact that she "was nothin' but er little throwed erway thing."

When the girl was fifteen this tyrant died, and upon Ellen's shoulders fell the household cares of the farm.

For her adopted father Ellen found it impossible even to pretend any affection; and certainly he had none for her, for Silas Daw had never cared in all his life for any soul but himself, and never for anything save his own pleasures — which consisted of all the hunting he felt equal to, and all the whiskey he could get hold of. In times past he had worked well enough on the farm when not hunting or intoxicated, but now in his latter years, whiskey and rheumatism had so combined to disable him, that the brunt of the farm work fell on Ellen, and girl though she was, her life was filled with a multiplicity of hard tasks that might have broken even a strong man down, and which lent

to her sombre face, besides its wistfulness, a look at times of utter weariness, as though no sleep could ever be long enough to rest her.

Growing up in this reserved and unloved atmosphere, Ellen reached out eagerly in secret and bestowed a wealth of unsuspected affection upon different people of the neighbourhood who chanced in some way to appeal to her fancy. And once having made them, as it were, her own, by her affection, she adored them with the motherhood of her love; and for the happiness of these her chosen people, no sacrifice on her own part would have seemed to her too great.

Unfortunately, the people upon whom the spirit of her love alighted never needed anything that she had to give them, least of all her yearning affection, and so went on their way entirely unconsicous of the abundance of devotion that was theirs to take.

For love and for loveliness Ellen Daw's heart was passionately hungry. Fortunately, in the desire for the latter, Nature, that dear universal old woman, who is sometimes a god and sometimes an infinitely close friend, and at no time exclusive with the exclusiveness of mankind, stepped in here and played the Fairy Godmother to this lonely Cinderella; spreading always before her an endless play of sunshine and cloud, and subtle evening shadows; summer bloom and tender tricks of blended colouring; infinite variety of music and fugitive perfumes; all wrought into a marvellous vast mosaic of delight, made up of sight, of sound, and of ethereal fragrance, and of all the manifestations of

the senses; having no boundaries, and no beginning or end, and shot through and welded together by an upper and under and all-encompassing envelopment of love, and the warm sunshine of joy.

Ellen Daw had one other thing, too, to give her happiness: a thing she rejoiced in, and hugged very tight. She could sing. She could sing better than anyone else in the Draft, or anywhere round; better than anyone she had ever heard, and she knew it. And when she sang, and then only, she loved herself with a passionate uplifting, because then she herself became the vehicle of something beautiful.

It was this eager desire for beauty in every form which made her wistful affections centre with peculiar intensity around Mary Reddin and David Cree, because they were the two most beautiful people she knew.

Mary Reddin was a constant source of wonder and delight to her. Her loveliness and gayety, and frank lack of reserve, fascinated and terrified her almost equally. When they were together Mary's bright friendliness and playfulness — more than any of the other girls of the neighbourhood ever showed her — alike embarrassed and fascinated her, and brought out all her awkward shyness; so that Mary never felt, though she truly desired to be friends with Ellen, that she ever got a step nearer to the silent girl. But when Ellen was alone, every look of the other's lovely little face, and touch of her radiant manner, came back to her with overwhelming sweetness, and she felt almost a maternal fierceness of protection for this joyous

personality, though she was only Mary's senior by a few years.

With David Cree, Ellen thought she was in love, in the ordinary meaning of the expression. Never an her wildest dreams did she think of his loving her; her whole opinion of herself was too humble, even if her long apprenticeship to indifference had failed to teach her her lesson. But under down-dropped lids, that never gave her secret away, she watched his every movement, and the few idle words he had ever spoken of her were treasured carefully in her heart. But though Ellen thus deceived herself, anyone who really knew her would have known that she was no more truly in love with David Cree than she was with Mary Reddin, or in truth with any manifestation of beauty.

At the head of the Draft, where it widens out for a moment before plunging into the side of Drupe Mountain, Ellen rode splashingly into the middle of Jumping Creek, where one fords it for the last time on the way up the mountain, and letting the mare's head down to drink she turned herself a little in her curious high-pommelled old saddle, and looked with expectant eyes — as she always did here — across the golden thread of the stream to a little green knoll — peppered all over just now with dandelions — which rose with a gracious round slope out of the valley, and swept back in ascending steeps until it lost itself in the wooded heights of Peter's Ridge. And on this grassy knoll, in all its glory, stood the marvel and admiration of the Jumping Creek Draft.

A neat, four-roomed brick cottage, with white porches at back and front, a paling fence around it, and chicken-coop and woodshed in the rear, may not seem a thing to excite intense curiosity and heated speculation. Nevertheless, its erection in the Draft gave good cause for surprise and comment.

In the first place, it was the only brick house that had ever appeared there — indeed it was the only one in a radius of ten miles, all the other dwellings being for the most part log cabins, with an occasional more pretentious frame house.

In the second place — why should such finished elegance and luxury be to ked away from the general public in the obscurity of the head of the Draft, while, had it been placed in the lower and more populous part of the valley, it might daily have gladdened many an eye with mingled envy and admiration? In the third and last place, and most of all to be wondered over — why had such a nest as this been built by Adrian Blair, an unmarried man, and one, moreover, who was not known to be paying particular attention to any of the pretty and attractive girls of the vicinity?

Truly, when one took all these things into consideration, it was hardly surprising that the little demure brick house should be food for such intensity of speculation.

For six months it had been finished; and for six months it had stood empty and unfurnished here on its hilltop, looking down the widening expanse of the Draft, and waiting for — what?

From her perch on her old mare Ellen looked eagerly at it on this afternoon with the familiar delight with which a child regards a much admired toy in a shop window.

Every time she passed the house she paused in the stream, ostensibly to water her horse, but in reality that she might fill her eyes with all the charms of the little dwelling.

None of its smallest details escaped her; and once, when no one was about, she had hidden her horse behind a clump of bushes by the roadside, and with quick glances in all directions had slipped through the gateway and up to the very porch of the house.

It was to her a visit to an enchanted palace. She had never ventured to go again. But no second trip was needed to keep fresh the remembrance of all its charms, and she had only to shut her eyes to see again the view down the valley from the little porch, and to remember that in the morning the sun looked in at the kitchen windows, and that in the afternoon it brightened the ones at the front. Nor did it require any effort on her part to recall the woodshed filed to overflowing with cut stove wood, nor that little fenced patch of ground at the back lying so ideally for a vegetable garden.

As Ellen raised her eyes on this particular evening to the house above her, with her usual flush of excitement, she saw that since her passing it in the morning Adrian Blair had been there at work, and now two little strips of fresh earth ran from the porch steps on

either side of the path down to the gate; so smooth and so even, and so irresistibly attractive, that Ellen's very fingers tingled to drop the necessary flower seeds into their bewitching depths.

"Well, I declar," she whispered in tender delight.

To her tired and longing heart these waiting seed beds seemed to give the last finishing touch to the place, and now, how dear, how homelike it all was!

"Well," she whispered again to herself, "hit's nice ter know there is sech pretty places in ther world. Hope nobody won't ever live in hit es won't take keer of hit," she added. For it seemed to her that it would be real suffering for this little cuddled dwelling ever to fall into careless hands.

Across the creek Ellen Daw's way left the main road and struck into a steep and rocky path between two sharp ridges of Drupe Mountain. Often in the early spring overflowed by a torrent of rushing yellow water, even now, at its best, the track was scarcely more than a dried creek bed. To Ellen and the old mare, however, its ruggedness was familiar enough, and neither was in any way disturbed by the blundering struggles of the mare as she scrambled over loose stones and up washedout banks, her progress filling the shut-in ravine with crashing re-echoing sounds.

It was nearly dark now, especially so in this narrow way between the ridges, and more than once Ellen adjured her horse to "Git erlong now, er I won't git my work done up 'til way in ther night."

But in truth she was in no very great hurry to get

home, for she loved the still woods at this time of the evening, and was loth to exchange their quiet and delicate fragrance for the hard tasks and probable scolding from her adopted father, which awaited her return.

So accustomed was she to the stillness and loneliness of the road it was with a quick start of surprise, as her horse came upon a grass-grown stretch where the hoof-beats fell almost noiselessly, that she heard some one or something coming down the track ahead of her, still hidden by a sharp bend of the road. At the sound the girl straightened up and caught her reins tighter with nervous dread, while she keyed herself to listen.

On that lonely track between the mountain's black sides, and in the fading still light, there was something terrifying in the sound of that mysterious thing blundering down the mountain toward her; and Ellen, who rarely knew what physical fear was, caught herself whispering in surprise, "I—I believe I'm skeered!"

It was an infinitely deserted road, and in case of danger the girl might have shricked in vain for help. Ellen knew this only too well, and — and, what was it, what could it be just around the bend there?

The sound was very close now, and she could make out heavy feet clumping and blundering among the loose stones, and once a pebble, kicked from the road, went flying away into the undergrowth with a tiny crash.

She and the thing were very close to the bend now; in a moment they would round it simultaneously.

"Lord!" the girl breathed fearfully, and with the ejaculation made the turn. Out of the twilight there reeled toward her the slouched figure of a man. His head was sunk down low between his shoulders and a thick growth of beard covered most of his face. Not raising his eyes, he passed the girl unseeingly, muttering under his breath and slipping among the stones.

At the sudden appearance of his vague shape out of the gloom, Ellen's horse had given a surprisingly quick bound to one side, and then stopped with a startled snort.

With a quieting word to the frightened animal, Ellen turned quickly in her saddle and looked after the unkempt figure, her heart beating unreasonably fast.

"Reckon hit must be one er Mr. Whitcomb's new hands at ther mill," she reassured herself under her breath, for she was surprised and a trifle ashamed that such an ordinary occurrence should have so startled her. Aleck Whitcomb's sawmill was set for the present on that part of Drupe Mountain not very far from the Daws' place; the road to it turned off Ellen's path a little distance further on, and nothing was more probable than that the man who had just passed her had come from there. Ellen sniffed the air — "Too drunk ter see where he's ergoin'," she concluded. Then she gave a queer little hysterical laugh.

"I wouldn't er thought ennything'd er skeered me so. I'd better be er gittin' erlong er somethin' else'll

come er jumpin' at me outer ther dark," she told herself scornfully. But contemptuous as she was over her fright, she nevertheless quickened the mare's gait to such good purpose that it was not many minutes before she arrived at her own home barn at almost a trot.

CHAPTER VIII

A DREAM OF FRESH EARTH

It was the day after the planting of Robert Reddin's corn-field, and the long golden fingers of afternoon sunlight beckoned to Mary Reddin irresistibly with the sweet allurement of out-of-doors.

"Ef you don't need me no more right now," she said to her mother, "I b'lieve I'll jest run over to A'nt Marthy Lamfire's an' git ther flower seeds she's bin er savin' fer me. She's got some er them red beans that brings these here little hummin' birds; an' some other seeds too, an' looks like termorrer's goin' ter be er nice day, an' I'd like ter git my garden planted."

"I don't need yer," Mrs. Reddin answered, "but Lor' me, Mary, I'd think you'd be skeered er that ole crazy woman."

"Mary ain't skeered er nuffin'," the next to the smallest Reddin suddenly piped up, regarding her with baby eyes of adoration.

"Oh yes, sir, I am skeered er somethin'," Mary returned.

He looked at her as one looks upon the shattering of a dearly loved idol.

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"Is you skeered, Mary?" he said. "What is you skeered of?"

"I'm skeered er you," she returned, looking down at him with mock eyes of terror.

A look of wonder and delight dawned in his small face, and he even assayed a slight masculine swagger ill suited to his skirts; but his answer came with fine graciousness:

"You needn't be skeered er me, Mary, I won't do anyfing ter yer," he said.

"But I am skeered," she persisted. "I'm skeered you'll eat me up!" and thereat she suddenly swooped upon him, and gathering him up in her arms she proceeded herself to devour him in the orthodox manner of older sisters, and having presently reduced him to a perfectly limp state of breathless gurgles, she deposited him in a chair, and catching up her pinky sunbonnet flitted out of the house and down the lane like a wind-blown streak of sunlight.

It was a couple of miles from the Reddins' place to the Mossy Hollow, and Mary walked quickly that she might be back in time to help with the evening chores. But in spite of her haste she found time to note the little wild flowers rioting in the sunny corners of the fence rows, and to observe a bluebird's nest in an old hollow stump; and at one place where a barren, slaty hillside was all a delicate haze of wild pansies she lingered a few moments in delight.

"I certainly am glad ter see yer all ergin," she said, nodding politely to the flowers. "Hit seems er power-

ful long time sence you was here, an' I wished you'd stay all summer; but reckon you'll hev took off them pretty blue dresses an' gone ter bed ergin 'fore hardly er month's out. I wouldn't be that lazy fer nothin'," she cried with a show of scorn. But she waved her hand to them as she left the pretty place, just to show she was in fun, and the pansies understood perfectly and their little flower faces lost none of their merry sweetness at her words.

She was warm and a little flushed when she came at length to the mouth of the Mossy Hollow, and glad enough to be taken into its shady arms, for she had walked fast, and part of the way she had even danced—for truly had she not joyous cause for dancing? A little distance up the hollow she sat down by the pathway to rest and cool off. The woods were all starred with pink and white trillium blossoms, and here and there on the azalea bushes were bursting buds and almost full blooms of rosy colour, and in the air was the subtle perfume of moist, shady woods and growing things.

Mary drew a long soft breath and smiled happily. She had a delicate sense of aliveness and of well-being, and suddenly in the mysterious atmosphere of the woods — her thoughts winging along the golden stretches of her love — she felt as though she were waking into communion with something wider and greater than her small self, as though she half guessed at a fuller life, a life not bounded by any of the trivial confines that she knew, but running through all the worlds and

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more besides; and as if in answer to it faculties within herself suddenly awoke and responded, and for a space she was swept away on an infinite wave of existence greater and more alive than anything she had ever known.

For a short time only was this curious uplitting upon her, then the strange illusive thing drew itself away once more into the unknown from whence it had looked forth, and again she was only a half frightened girl sitting alone in the green woods of May. Yet though it fled, in its trail was left a great exultation and love of life, and a compassion for those who were somehow out of tune with it; and as she rose, the light of her love and of her awed surprise still on her face, her thoughts turned compassionately to the old woman whom she was going to visit, and who seemed so cruelly shut away from all the gladness of existence by the grey walls of her own bitter thoughts.

There had been something of a tie between Martha Lamfire and Mary Reddin ever since a day five or six years ago when the old woman had noticed Mary for the first time.

It was a winter school day, and Mary, having been delayed by something, was racing down the road to overtake the main bunch of the Draft children. She ran lightly with her head up in the air, the stinging cold making her cheeks flame, and suddenly at a turn in the road she came face to face with old Martha. Stepping quickly out of the narrow beaten path into the deep snow, Mary would have passed with a hasty

"Howdy," — for like most of the children of the neighbourhood she was afraid of the old woman's curious look and wild eyes. But as they came abreast a skinny hand shot out all at once from under the frayed plaid shawl and gripping Mary's arm brought her to a sudden stand. For a moment the old woman peered into the girl's rosy face with startling black eyes; then — "Aire you Robert Reddin's girl?" she demanded.

"Yes'm, Mary Reddin," Mary faltered, panting a little, for she was frightened. Martha looked at her a moment longer.

"Yer pretty," she said at length harshly, "so was my Ammy, but hit did. 't help her none," and loosing the girl's arm with a fling, she went on once more upon her lonely way. And Mary sped home to question her mother about Ammy Lamfire. And after she heard the girl's tragic little story, child though she was, she felt an eager desire to be kind to the old woman, and with many little acts of friendliness she wooed her at length into something of an intimacy.

When Mary made her way to the lonely cabin at the head of the hollow on this occasion, she found old Martha at work in her garden patch, her whole shrivelled personality almost of a colour with the brown earth.

The last ten years had altered her little. The death of Amabel had made the one great change in her life, and aged and withered by that, like a blighted leaf, the years afterwards had little effect upon her. In the

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dooryard a few perennials shot up out of the grass, remnants of Amabel's little garden of long ago, and by the corner of the porch a great bush of bridal wreath was almost hidden in its own clouds of white bloom.

"Howdy, A'nt Marthy," Mary called across the fence to her. The old woman spun around at her greeting, and whipped off her sunbonnet that she might see.

"Howdy, howdy," she jerked. "Walk up onter ther porch an' set yerself down." And sticking her unwieldy mattock into the ground she came across the furrows to the girl in uneven strides.

"I come over ter see could I git ther flower seeds yer promised," Mary said, dropping down to a seat on the edge of the porch.

"I'll fetch 'em right out now," said the other, disappearing as she spoke into the cabin.

"Ef yer hadn't er come fer 'em terday I'd er sent yer word, fer ther moon's right now, an' hit's time they was in ther ground," she continued, presently reappearing with her hands full of little newspaper packages wrapped around with thread, in which were the desired seeds, together with many a withered petal.

"There," she said, dropping them all save one package into Mary's lap; "them's ther coxcombs, an' zinnias, an' balsams, an' marigolds; an' that big package is ther red beans."

So saying she seated herself on the step by the girl, and drawing her thin knees up under her chin she clasped her arms about them, her back against a post

of the porch. "An' now," she went on, regarding the girl with bright witch eyes, "I'm ergoin' ier giv' you what I never 'lowed ter giv' ter nobody," and unclasping one hand she held up the little bundle she had retained.

"This here," she said, "is some maid-in-ther-mist seed, or ther same stock es some Ammy planted ther year she died. I've planted hit every year sence and saved ther seed, an' now I'm ergoin' ter giv' hit ter you, seein' es you're a good hand with flowers, an' I want you ter plant hit so's ther'll be somethin' left in ther Draft es Ammy hed er hand in."

Mary took the seeds held out to her — descendants of those far-away ancestors planted almost twenty-five years ago by the dead girl.

"But whyn't yer plant 'em yerself this spring like yer allers do?" she questioned.

The old woman shook her head.

"I'll not see 'em bloom this year," she said.

"Lor', A'nt Marthy, why not?" cried the girl.

"No, sir, I won't see 'em bloom," the old woman went on, "I've hed er vision er fresh earth two nights runnin', an' reckon I know well ernough what that means."

"Lor'," Mary returned, trying to turn the words off lightly. "Don't talk that erway; reckon most anybody could dream er fresh earth in ther spring. I was plantin' corn all yesterd'y an' I seen er whole field er fresh earth las' night."

At her words the woman's eyes lit up like a flame,

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and she thust her strange, crazy old face close to the girl's.

"Don't yer make er mock er me, girl," she cried fiercely, as Mary shrunk away from her, startled. "I tell yer I've dreamt er dream twict er fresh earth, an' ther'll be two graves dug in this yere Draft 'fore ther month's out; one er them'll be mine, I reckon, an' ther Lord knows I don't keer ef hit is; but who ther other'll be ther dream ain't said." She got up suddenly and stood beside the girl, looking away down the little hollow. "Aha-a," she said slowly, "two fresh graves; an' I've seed er shadder in ther Draft too, what nobody else ain't seed yit, but they will see hit. An' hit's er shadder what's follerin' David Cree."

"David Cree?" screamed the girl, struggling to her feet.

The old woman whirled upon her, "What's David Cree ter you?" she demanded.

Mary put her hand to her breast and tried to recover herself.

"He - he's -" she stammered and was silent.

The old woman looked at her a moment half pityingly. "O Lord, them Crees!" she cried at length, passionately. "Alderson Cree broke my girl's heart, an' you'd better mind out David don't break your'n."

For a moment longer she stared wildly at the girl; then she spoke in a softened tone and her look was almost affectionate.

"You don't believe what I say," she said, "but ef I'm took sick will yer come ter me?"

"Er course I will, A'nt Marthy, er course," Mary promised eagerly, stooping to pick up the dropped seed packages, and slipping them into her pocket.

"I mus' go now," she said hesitatingly, the colour beginning to come back to her face, though she was still frightened.

Martha stepped over to the bush of bridal wreath and began breaking off long branches of the snowy bloom.

"Be you goin' back by ther low places, past ther Hull graveyard?" she asked.

Mary wavered a moment. "I — I reckon so," she said at length, though she had meant to return by the road, the way by which she had come.

"Then take these here ter Ammy," the other said, loading her arms with the white sprays. "Put 'em on her grave an' tell her I say her mammy'll be erlong soon."

Mary gathered the bridal wreath carefully in one arm, and climbing over the fence set out once more down the hollow, the old woman calling after her, "Be sure an' come when I send fer yer."

Mary walked quickly along the path, and when a bend hid her from the cabin she even ran, for she had been really frightened this time and she still had an uncomfortable feeling that the crazy old woman might be following her. But when she reached the mouth of the hollow where it enters the Draft, she found this wider world quite as gay and almost as sunny as when she had left it, and its tranquillity reassured her some-

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what. Nevertheless she whispered half resentfully, "I wish folks wouldn't go dreamin' er fresh earth, an' talkin' er shadders on er pretty day like this." But then she whispered again to comfort herself, "Pshaw! hit's jest ther pore ole soul's craziness." And the world after all, as seen from the Draft, appearing to be a safe and happy place, she gave her shoulders a toss to rid herself of the black fear that had settled upon her, and then went on her way almost as radiantly as before.

Crossing the main road of the Draft she climbed a fence or two and struck into the little path leading toward the Reddins' farm over the low places on a spur of the Drupe Mountain, which here almost cuts the Draft in two.

The path was elastic with moss under her feet, and the hillsides here sloped towards the south, so that these woods were sunnier and warmer than those of the Mossy Hollow, and in their genial hearts the very essence of spring seemed rioting in bloom and uncurling fern fronds; as though the great spirit of the woods had divided itself into a myriad of tiny personalities, and become incarnated for the mere joy of the earth life in springtime into all the little blue and white hepaticas, the dainty claytonias, bloodroot, adder's tongue, columbine, and all the assembled multitude of rainbow tint and fragrance; like a sunbeam broken by the prism into its component colours. And one might have imagined an undercurrent of gay conversation between these delicate personalities — all

different manifestations of one great thought; the conversation in a key too ethereal for physical ears which guess not of the wonderful unheard things which go on above and below their scale of hearing. Or perhaps, after all, the spirits of flowers communicate with each other by fragrance, and hold long conversations all in perfume.

At the Hull burying ground where Amabel Lamfire's dead beauty had been laid five and twenty years before, Mary turned from the pathway and stepped carefully across the little uneven mounds, until she came to Amabel's. There was no stone to mark it from the rest of the graves, but Mary knew it by a clump of jonquils at its head. Few indeed of the graves had stones, the remembrance of their position being entrusted to love, helped out by an occasional root of some of the home flowers, taken from the dooryard and planted there to make, as it were, an added tender connection between the departed and their old surroundings; and among the graves that May afternoon many an old-fashioned garden bloom had opened its spring eyes, a little surprised, perhaps, to find itself in the quiet of the shadowy woods instead of the accustomed sunniness of the doorvard where it had yearly battled for existence with the all-pervading children and chickens.

At Amabel's grave Mary knelt down, and taking the burden of white blooms from her arm she laid them over the carpet of periwinkle vine which had run riot among all the graves, and as the last white spray left

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her hand she whispered softly, "Yer mammy sent yer these, an' she says she'll be erlong soon." Then half surprised at herself she looked wondering down at the heap of blooms. Why had she so naturally repeated the crazy old woman's message? Just as though the dead girl could really hear - could she perhaps? With the thought the realization of the nearness of the unseen world swept over the girl for the first time. Was it possible that Amabel Lamfire, in a beauty of spirit probably far more beautiful than even her exquisite physical personality had been, stood by and watched this other voung daughter of the Draft piling the white bridal wreath all over her grave — the bridal wreath which was never hers to wear? And if she watched, what did she feel toward the girl who loved Alderson Cree's son? Would she resent another's happiness because her own heart had been broken? With a quick fear Mary put her delicately pure face down among the flowers, and whispered, "Let me an' David be happy! Oh! let me an' David be happy," over and over. And in her heart she meant her petition only for Amabel Lamfire.

For a moment more she bent over the grave, then with a last touch upon the flowers she rose to her feet and stepping again across the other graves regained the path, and as she did so she came suddenly face to face with David Cree.

David gave a low, joyous laugh, as though the sight of her was the consummation of a long train of golden dreams.

"I thought maybe you'd come back this erway," he said. "Mis' Reddin said you'd gone over ter A'nt Marthy's."

He stood still in the path before her without moving nearer, just looking at her, as though the reality of her sweet presence came to him as a fresh surprise.

Then all at once, and still in silence, he opened wide his arms and held them out to her.

An instant Mary hesitated half fearfully. But there was nothing now about him of the fierce passion that he had showed the evening before, instead his silent gesture wooed her tenderly, almost reverently.

A moment more she paused, then with the flash of a bird she went into the shelter of his arms, and her heart and her soul went with her.

And thus in the green aisles of the spring woods David Cree and Mary Reddin made their promises to one another, up by the old Hull graveyard.

CHAPTER IX

A HAPPY MAN

"HAPPY is the man who has found his life's work." Ah! happy indeed! But how few find it, or when finding it recognize it, and know past all doubt that in that occupation and in no other shall they find their best fulfilment!

How many, instead, answer to every chance pipe of circumstance, and dance first in one direction and then in another, leaving behind a zig-zag feeble trail, in place of the straight line of progress.

Finding his life's work, George Hedrick knew it, and was a happy man. He loved life and the companionship of his fellow-men, women, and children; he loved the gossip of things past and present, and the guesses at the future; he loved a shady porch to sit upon in the summer, and a warm stove to toast his feet at in the winter, and always in both seasons an extra chair for a friend; and all these things of his desire came to him in full measure, pressed down and running over, with the keeping of a cross-roads store.

"An' I wouldn't trade this here little ole store for ther White House," he was wont to say. "No, sir, I wouldn't be President fer nothin'!"

"That's lucky," Orin Snyder was apt to cut in here, "seein' as nobody ain't votin' fer yer."

"No," Hedrick would continue, undisturbed by the other's derision; "hit's all I kin do ter take in all what's goin' on in this here little Draft, an' do hit right, an' I know dog goned well I couldn't do ther whole United States jestice. Why, look at all ther things what happens here jest in one week. Look at week befor' last - first thing Monday mornin' Cape Johnson come in feelin' powerful good an' says ther's a baby come ter their house; an' seein' hit's a boy an' his first one, I says reckon he knowed who'd be President in erbout forty years from now. Then Wednesday word come er ther shootin' scrap up at Whitcomb's camp. Thursday ole Mis' Woods died, an' Friday mornin' Adrian Blair an' Joe Snyder had high words an' come pretty night ter fightin' right here in ther store. Saturday erlong come er drummer feller an' tried ter sell me er whole chanst er no-'count goods, an' I hedn't more'n jest Sunday ter talk over all these things when here come Monday mornin' ergin an' er whole trail er new things er goin' on. An' ef so much happens jest right eround here, hit stands ter reason that ther's mo' still erhappenin' in all ther United States, what ther President has ter see ter, an' reckon that's er job would run me plum distracted. No, sir! give me er cross-roads store ev'ry time, an' any ole feller kin have ther White House."

In truth, with such abundant opportunity for the study of life, and sufficient for a livelihood, what more

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could any man desire? Certainly George Hedrick wished for nothing further. Winter found him in doors, meeting all comers at the checker-board; and summer saw him seated on his little porch looking at the face of Drupe Mountain, and giving cheerful greeting to the various neighbours who meandered up and down the main road of the Draft, and the one that came from Clear Creek and ran up to the farms on top of Drupe; the two cutting across each other at his store.

Fortunately for Hedrick, almost directly in front of his shop the Jumping Creek, on one of its many erratic dives from one side of the valley to the other, flows at this spot across the county road, making thereby a sweet and shady little ford overhung by the big branches of a willow tree; through which ford few travellers passed without letting their horses' heads down for a drink. And while the horses refreshed their thirsty throats, the storekeeper, in the few minutes' pause, refreshed their drivers with the latest tid-bits of shouted news. And when there chanced hot, rainless summers which dried the Jumping Creek to a mere undrinkable the ead of water, so that teams and equestrians alike dashed through it without stopping, George Hedrick's life held its nearest approach to tragedy, and his usual genial nature was stung almost to pessimism.

But the spring that David Cree courted Mary Reddin up by the old Hell burying-ground had had its full store of quickening rain storms, and the Jumping Creek splashed and tumbled over its pebbly bed with

almost the full gurgle of winter; and it was beyond most human nature to pass through its dancing waters without at least a moment's pause in the translucent coolness. And more than one child from near by farms came down, surreptitiously avoiding mother eyes, to dip their bare legs into the water, and dig eager toes into its delicious oozy sand beds. In witness of the truth whereof, behold Master Billy Tompkins, with forefinger hooked in either trouser leg to hold them out of harm's way, wading fearlessly into the shining depths. It was still that corn-planting week in May, and the weather yet held the same sweet serenity of clearness that had shone so propitiously upon Robert Reddin's planting and upon David Cree's courting; weather that every farmer blessed upon arising, and was loth to have the darkness snatch from him at eve.

"There's allers so much use fer pretty days in May," Robert Reddin was wont to say, "that seems like er shame ter hev ther nights come erlong an' cut 'em in two jest like they wa'n't no mo' use' an ef they was winter days."

As he waded deeper into the Jumping Creek the fresh water rippled whitely about Billy's ankles, then about his calves, and then it reached laughingly for his knees. It was cold and it was strong, and on the slippery stones there was a fearsome chance of sitting abruptly down, waist deep in its chill translucency; but a bluebird sang in the willow overhead, and it was spring, and the sky flashed him gay encouragement and daring, and just a few steps more, through the

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deepest part, and he would be over there in that sandy still reach where were flat stones in the soft bottom, under which were perhaps — O joy and excitement! — crayfishes! Billy took a step or two more; in spite of all his best efforts his trousers now dipped gently into the water — but just a few steps further — just a few — Alas! at this expectant moment the imperative tones of his older sister floated over to him from the Tompkins homestead.

"Billy! Aw Bil lee!" Billy paused a moment in consideration — did that long overhanging sweep of the willow branch hide him from the house? or did it not?

"Bil lee!" again the voice floated over, and though it only called his name, this time there was in it a certain note of intensity which to Billy's trained ear and alert conscience spoke volumes. To them it said, with unmistakable clearness — "Yer needn't ter think I don't see yer down there er paddling in that water"; therefore he decided to parley.

"What yer want?" he cried back.

"Mammy-says-fer-you-ter-quit-playin'-in-that-water an'-come-on-here-an'-git-her-some-chips," the voice answered in one breath, with a rising climax.

Billy looked longingly at the flat stones — the happy homes of the crayfishes — so nearly now within reach — so near. Then he braced himself for a daring retort.

"Tell her ter wait," he shouted.

There was a short pause this time while the sister

at the house communicated this astonishing reply to higher authority and received fresh instruction; then again the voice came over to him.

"She-says-she'll-wait-on-ye!" it called.

The mere words themselves seemed to promise unlimited patience on the maternal part, then why should the hearing of them cause Billy so instantly to abandon all further pursuit of the wily crayfish, and splashing hastily out of the creek and up the bank, to streak away along the road toward home at such an agitated and obediently quick pace? George Hedrick, interested spectator of the whole scene from his porch, drove his hands deeper into his pockets, and tilting his chair back more securely against the wall chuckled softly, "An' reckon ef Mis' Tompkins hed sent word ter me thet she'd wait on me, that erway, I wouldn't er kep' her waitin' much longer neither," he remarked to Lloyd Johnson.

"Howdy, Mis' Cooper, howdy," he continued politely to Aleck Cooper's wife, as she stepped wearily up on to the porch, a basket of eggs on either arm, and a general appearance of moist fatigue about her. Without a word she sank into the chair the storekeeper pushed forward, and removing her black slatted sunbonnet fanned herself for several moments in silence while she recovered her breath in long gasps. She was a fat woman, with a complaining, somewhat plaintive air toward the world in general, as though she blamed her neighbours for her corpulent discomfort.

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"Ain't hit awful warm?" she flashed upon George Hedrick at length, laying the blame for the heat with him.

"'Tis so - 'tis so," he answered, his tranquillity unruffled even by having the responsibility of the weather laid at his door. Again silence fell between the three. It was hot, very hot for May, and in spite of the clearness of the sky one felt the languor of a possible thunderstorm. It was also a breathlessly still afternoon — and a dull one too, at the store, for the reason that most of the Draft people were busy with their crops. The storekeeper thrust his hands still deeper into his pockets and whistled an idle tune between his teeth. He did not feel inspired by his company and was somewhat inclined to quarrel with a fate that could for the moment provide nothing more inspiriting in the way of companionship or gossip. Lloyd Johnson, sent on an errand by his wife, had dawdled with him for the last two hours, the first quarter of which had sufficed for Hedrick to wring him dry of what meagre store of news he possessed. Mrs. Cooper's hoard of gossip, if she possessed any, would be of the grievance variety, and Hedrick shrank from tapping it on a hot afternoon. It was therefore with a feeling of pleasant anticipation that he heard the soft slipslop of a pacing horse approaching along the road.

He brought his chair abruptly down to its four legs and leaned eagerly forward, the other two turning expectant looks also in the direction of the sound; and with these three pairs of eyes awaiting him Adrian

Blair swung suddenly into view around the turn, mounted on a high-headed black horse, whose sleek sides shimmered in the May sunshine. Adrian rode with a conscious air of superiority, fully aware of the excitement he caused, and as he came opposite the store a dexterous heel made the horse bound spiritedly from side to side of the road, with arched neck and rippling tail.

Nothing of the whole performance was lost upon the storekeeper, and as Adrian called a greeting to him, he rose from his chair and sweeping off his hat bowed low in elaborate sarcasm.

The other waved a gracious hand in reply.

"Oh! don't mind me," he called back condescendingly; "I was er poor man once myself!" and dashing into the ford he sent the water up in high showers of silver spray, and without pausing to drink he and his horse — a dazzling spectacle — were presently lost around the next bend of the road.

Hedrick resumed his chair a trifle crestfallen; not that the magnificence of it all overawed him, but he was not used to any one rising so quickly and so successfully to his own airy persiflage.

Fleeting as Adrian's appearance was upon the scene, it nevertheless opened the sluice-gate of conversation.

"Now I'd liked ter know where'd he git that horse?" Lloyd Johnson demanded, with keen disapproval showing in his lugubriously lank countenance.

"He brung him home from Randolph County when he come out er camp. An' I heered him say he wouldn't

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take three hundred dollars fer him," Hedrick answered.

"An he said hit 'cause he knowed mighty well he wouldn't git nobody ter pay him that fer him," he added.

"Well, I don't think hit looks right fer er young feller ter be idling 'round all day keepin' ther road hot that erway, when ev'rybody else round's pretty nigh drove ter death with ther plantin'," Johnson continued still with disfavour.

But at this Mrs. Cooper whirled suddenly upon him. "Well, reckon I know one man what ain't been pretty nigh drove ter death—not fer ther last two hours, anyhow," she said pointedly.

Here, however, Hedrick hastily interposed, turning the conversation into safer channels — for long experience had taught aim to scent the battle from afar.

"Reckon Adrian kin erford ter do some galervantin'," he said pacifically, "with money in ther bank, an' that house er his'n."

"Wonder is he thinkin' er gettin' married?" Johnson speculated, eager to seize on anything which diverted the conversation from himself.

"Wonder would he go buildin' er nest ef he wa'n't?" Hedrick returned scornfully

"Well, he certainly is er terrible young feller," Johnson went on, with a solemn shake of his head. "I ain't never seen his beat ter fight. Der yer recollect ther time him an' Cape had ther bresh?"

"Reckon I do," said Hedrick. "Adrian was mad that time sure 'nough. Recollec' he said he'd take er

string an' tie his right hand ter his lef' foot an' whip ther whole shee-bang — an' I recollect er nother time too, when Adrian drove me an' some other fellers over ter Clear Creek ter go huntin' with ther Saunders boys over in there. Hit was a dark night an' Adrian was drivin' thet pair er colts he used ter hey', an' they wa'n't mo'n jest broke then an'd run ef you'd look at 'em, an' first one an' then ther other was up on his hind legs all ther way, an' ef they ever did happen ter hey mo'n four feet between 'em on ther groun' at ther same time, Ade, he'd pull out his pistol an' fire hit off — an' maybe we'd git stopped by ther end er ther next mile, an' maybe we wouldn't. Hit's er right smart piece over ter Clear Creek, an' I ain't usually fond er walkin', but I footed it home next mornin'. Fer I said ter myself ef ther Lord'd jest let me git safe out er that waggon that one time, I wouldn't never go temptin' Him ergin by drivin' with Adrian Blair." and he drew a long breath of satisfaction in his present safety - and added, "That sort er recklessness don't reely afford me no kinder pleasure."

"Reckon Adrian don't know what it is ter be erfraid," Johnson said speculatively.

"Reckon he don't," the other assented. "An' hit's er mighty nice thing fer yerself ter feel that erway, but hit makes hit right hard for yer friends ef they hev ter keep up with you."

"You all ain't fair ter Adrian," Mrs. Cooper broke in here abruptly, almost angrily; and for a moment her real self seemed lifted out of her usual peevish challenge.

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"I reckon ther's one person in this Draft that's powerful glad Adrian Blair ain't erfraid er nothin' — an' that person's me," she said. "You recollect thet December ther creek was up so high an' ther come er freeze an' froze hit all erlong ther edges?"

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"I recollect," the storekeeper answered, "hit was ther same time that Ed Huston an' 'Melia Rivers got married, an' ther ford was up so here at the store, that when Brother Braxton come up from Linden ter marry 'em, he was feard to come over and hed ter jest naterally marry 'em across ther water, him standin' on one side er her creek shoutin' out er his little book ter 'em an' they hollerin' back at him from tother. I recollect 'Melia was mad, 'cause she had ter kneel down right spang in ther middle er ther road, an' though they did spread er quilt down, ther ground was so powerful damp and oozy-like ther water soaked right up through hit and made two spots on her dress jest where her knees come, so's she couldn't never wear hit ergin 'cept ter prayer meetin', an' she'd always 'lowed anyhow ter be merried by ther Presbyterian preacher so's her dress wouldn't git tumbled, cause they don't make yer kneel down ertall; but ther water was up so high she an' Ed couldn't git into Wayside."

"Yes, thet was ther time," the woman assented, "an' hit was jest afterwards that thet powerful cold spell come an' froze everything up; an' jest erbout that time my baby was took with ther pneumony. Ther ford up near us was ther highest in ther Draft, all froze up at ther edges, an' powerful swift in ther middle. We

hollered acrost ter Orin Snyder's folks an' got some er them ter go down ter Linden fer ther doctor; but when he got up es fer es our ford he couldn't git his horse ter go on ther ice ter come ercrost, cause ther ice'd break es soon es er horse'd git er little piece out on hit. An' I jest thought my baby was ergoin' ter die with the doctor over there acrost ther creek jest out er reach. But 'bout thet time, when I was ready ter give up, Adrian Blair, he come erlong on thet powerful grey horse er his - hit was one er them colts you spoke of - an' when he heered what ther trouble was, he cut him er big withe an' rode thet horse er his right out on ther ice, an' broke er way clear so's ther doctor's horse could foller. An' I reckon there was mo' 'n one er us thought hit was Adrian's las' day when we seed thet big horse erplungin' an' rearin' round an' tryin' ter break back ter shore in all thet ice an' water, but Adrian jest looked like he was enjoyin' hisself, an' I ain't never fergot hit, an' what's mo' I say whoever Adrian does marry'll git er man fer er husband what kin look after her, an' not jest er hog with er right nice sty." She ended abruptly as she had begun, and shutting her lips into a straight defiant line looked at the two men, daring them to contradict her statement.

"Well I reckon yer erbout right," the storekeeper admitted. "Fer all his don't-keer reckless ways Adrian's get er mighty kind heart in him."

"That's so," said Johnson, following as usual the majority. And as they both seemed disposed to agree with her, Mrs. Cooper presently took her fierce eyes

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from them, and shaking out her dress rose to her feet.

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"I'm cooled off now," she said, "an' reckon I'll do my tradin'," and taking up her baskets of eggs she entered the cool gloom of the little store with all its heterogeneous collection of wares, followed by Hedrick.

CHAPTER X

THE SHADOW

MRS. COOPER'S trading at length conducted to a termination satisfactory to both parties she once more settled her sunbonnet on her tightly drawn hair, and with a "Good evenin' ter yer all" stepped heavily eff the porch and turned her face homeward, already beginning to pant slightly in fat anticipation of the first hill. Lloyd Johnson sighed and turned a dubious gaze toward the declining sun, shutting one pale blue eye, and cocking his head sideways to do so.

"Reckon I ort ter be travellin', too," he said reluctantly.

"Oh! no, set erwhile," Hedrick urged with tolerant politeness, though it must be admitted the politeness was somewhat perfunctory, for now that the sun sloped so low to the west, there was chance of more congenial and exciting companionship in the shape of other neighbours drifting down to the store for a half-hour's crack at the tail of the day. Lloyd, however, ignored the perfunctoriness, and caught eagerly at the invitation.

"Well, reckon I kin spare er little time longer," he said, again relaxing to his settled inertia.

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Once more silence fell between the two and they sat staring up the road, as one might stare out to sea for a long expected sail.

There is a theory that desire begets realization. Be that as it may, Lloyd Johnson and George Hedrick's yearning eyes were presently rewarded by the sight of Orin Snyder's large frame swinging into view.

"Well, ef here don't come ole Orin," Lloyd announced, as though heralding the approach of a long-lost brother. Hedrick's face also lighted with anticipation, and when Orin stepped up onto the porch he greeted him with extreme suavity.

"Good evenin', Mr. Snyder!" he said, with an affable wave of two fingers toward his hat which sat jauntily on the back of his head.

"Good evenin', Mr. Hedrick," the other returned, bowing with equal urbanity. Hedrick eyed him a moment longer, then "Hello, Orin!" he said.

"Hello, George!" Snyder responded; and having thus, as it were, established each other's official and every-day identity, the two dropped back into their usual parlance.

"An' what's ther news up your way?" the storekeeper inquired, pushing a chair forward with a hospitable foot.

"Ain't none's I know of," Synder returned, accepting the chair in the spirit in which it was offered, "'cept that I heered ole Marthy Lamfire was took sick."

"Is that er fact? Much sick?"

"No, not so powerful, jest kinder grunty an' ailin'; ther women folks is takin' turns erbout stayin' with her."

"Well, I'm sorry fer ther ole woman, an' I certainly don't wish her no harm, but she ever mo' lastingly giv' me er good skeer onct," Hedrick said reminiscently.

"How was that?" Snyder inquired with his perennial interest in all the storekeeper's anecdotes, an interest which made him always to the former a dear and valued companion. Of Lloyd Johnson, on the other hand, Hedrick was wont to complain: "That he didn't never hev nothin' ter say hisself, but worse'n that he never 'peared ter be 'specially interested in what any other feller hed ter say."

"Why, hit was one time five or six years back," the storekeeper began, "I come by her house in ther fall, an' she was out in ther yard makin' her apple butter. I stopped ter git me er drink at ther well, an' someway in lettin' ther bucket down, I knocked er little tin pail er butter she hed hangin' inside ther well ter keep cool, off hit's nail, an' right down into ther water. Well, with that she jest flew mad d'rectly, an' mos' fo' I could ketch my breath she giv' me one er ther completest cussin's I ever did hev."

"An' what did you do?" Snyder inquired, grinning. "Well, it allers did kinder upset me an' make me sorter nervous an' rattle-headed ter be cussed, an' reckon fo' I thought what I was doin' I mus' er said somethin' that I ortn't ter said ter er lady, fer fo' I could er said Jack Robinson — ef I'd er wanted ter,

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which I didn't — here she come at me ercrost ther yard with ther pole she'd bin er stirrin' ther apple butter with. Well, I reckon most any fool would er hed sense ernough ter run, but someway I kinder lost my head, an' fo' I knowed hit I was er skinning up er little sugar maple tree, with her er plasterin' my legs with hot apple butter fo' I could git 'em drawed up under me out er reach."

Snyder slapped his leg and roared.

"I'd er liked ter er seed you goin' up that little tree," he said.

George grinned somewhat sheepishly in sympathy. "I'd er liked ter er seed myself ef hit hed er been somebody else," he said, "but seein' hit was me, hit didn't give me no amusement at ther time."

"An' how long did yer stay up there?" the other inquired.

"I stayed there till, fer er mercy, her ole cow broke inter her cabbage patch, an' while she went ter run her out, I climbed down right easy, an' took out down ther holler. An' I ain't been in ther Mossy Run since, an' I ain't ergoin' neither."

"Who's that feller comin'?" Lloyd Johnson broke in, suddenly pointing up the road. The oth rtwo, turning their eyes in the same direction, beheld a slouched man of middle age coming towards them at an uneven shuffle. His head was down so that his hat brim partly concealed his face, and what did appear was covered with a rank growth of beard of a streaked greyish brown.

Hedrick studied him a moment, "Looks like er stranger ter me," he said at length.

"I know who he is," Snyder struck in, but in a lowered voice as the man approached. "He's one er ther new hands Aleck Whitcomb's got workin' up at ther sawmill at ther head er Drupe Mountain. I seen him an' some other strange fellers Aleck hed jest got in when I went up there er week er so ergo ter see erbout gittin' some slabs."

As he finished his explanation the stranger arrived at the porch steps. Pausing, he gave the three a quick and somewhat furtive glance from under dropped lids.

"Good evenin'," he said in general, and then 'urning to the storekeeper — "Kin I git er plug er 'Rosey Lee' turbacker here?" he inquired.

Hedrick scrutinized him in silence for a moment, then —"You kin," he responded. "Step inside," he continued, rising from his chair.

The man obeyed, and Hedrick followed him into the shop. Their transaction was a short one, and in a few minutes the stranger emerged, and nodding once more to Snyder and Johnson dropped off the porch and slouched away up the road again.

Snyder eyed his departing figure with keen disfavour.

"Hit's surprisin' what er heap er trash er sawmill will bring inter er place," he grunted.

"What makes yer think that feller's trash?" Johnson inquired.

"Don't yer reckon I know trash when I see hit?" Orin returned pugnaciously.

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While the other paused to deliberate a sufficiently pacific reply, Hedrick dawdled out to the porch again and settled back in his chair.

"I reckon yer know trash when yer see hit all right, Orin," he said; "but ther's somethin' else yer don't 'pear ter know."

"An' what's that?" Snyder demanded, still pugna ciously.

Hedrick drew out his jack knife deliberately, and leaning forward with extreme care selected a clean sliver from the broken cover of an opened grocery box, and tilting his chair back against the wall he began sending little showers of yellow-white shavings down into his lap and off onto the floor.

"Was either er yer fellers ever out in ther woods by yerself, erlistenin' fer somethin', an' did yer ever hear er man come runnin'?" he inquired. "Hit's not like hearin' dogs er a varmint," he went on, not waiting for a reply. "There's somethin' happenin' when yer hear er man running' in ther woods, an' hit most usually means trouble. I was out squirrel huntin' onct on Hare Hill, an' I heered er man runnin'; an' when he come up ter me hit was Aleck Cooper, an' he went by like er streak, jest hollerin' out that George Blair'd cut his leg off in ther sawmill, an' he was going fer ther doctor." He paused and regarded the whittled stick critically, turning it about in his hand; the others waiting in expectant silence.

"An' I was out in ther woods ergin ernother time," he resumed. "Only this time I happened ter be er-

waitin' on er deer stan', an' all at onct I heered somethin' comin' runnin' ergin over furninst ther next ridge. An' I'd heered ther dogs runnin' in Clear Creek, an' I says ter myself hit must be er deer. An' with that I commenced ter take ther buck ague. But then I listened ergin, an' hit didn't run like er deer, an' I says, 'No, hit can't be', an' by that time ther runnin' was right close, an' all at once I knowed hit was er human. An' I jest set my teeth an' listened, fer I knowed somethin' was ther matter an' I was skeered. An' I tell yer, fellers, hit wasn't more'n er minute 'fore here come Dave Cree erbreakin' through ther bresh, his face lookin' like he'd seed over ther fence inter ther next world, an' er hollerin' that Kip Ryerson'd shot his Pappy. I tell yer that's twict I've heered er man runnin' in ther woods, an' hits' er thing er feller don't fergit in er hurry," he wound up.

"Well, reckon I remember that hunt's well es you,"

Snyder broke in jealously.

Hedrick closed his knife with a snap, and tossed away his whittled stick.

"Reckon yer don't, then," he said; "fer ef yer did yer'd know who that feller what's jest left here is."

Snyder looked at him a moment as though something were coming slowly back to him, then with an oath he sprang to his feet.

"Kip Ryerson!" he cried.

"That's ther feller," the storekeeper returned quietly.

"Lord!" said Johnson.

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"An' ter think er few years an' er growed beard would make me fergit his ugly face," Snyder cried with keen self-scorn.

"Lord!" Johnson ejaculated again. For a space silence held the three, as they searched one another's faces in question as the fact of Ryerson's return came home to them in all its fulness of meaning. At length Johnson broke the silence.

"Wonder does Dave know he's back?" he speculated. Hedrick regarded him with utter contempt.

"Did Kip erpear ter be erlive an' well when he was here jest now?" he demanded.

"Er course he did — what'd you suppose?" the other returned.

"Then I recl. . Dave don't know he's back — an' what's more," he continued, looking at Johnson pointedly, "I don't see no cause fer no one ter go telling him."

"Thought he was dead anyhow," Lloyd complained.

"Reckon he thought 'bout when Dave growed up was er good time fer him ter go West an' give out he was dead, or he might stay East an' be dead sure 'nough." Hedrick retorted.

"What in thunder did he come back in here fer — er fool!" said Snyder.

"Cause he kin git good wages over in here, an' cause he thought nobody'd know him, I reckon the storekeeper returned.

"Well, I don't call this no place fer him"; said Johnson, gloomily. He was a man who loved the even tenor

of the valley's ways, and he could not help feeling on this occasion that if David discovered Ryerson and broke the peace of the neighbourhood by killing him, or attempting to do so, it would make everything very unsettled and inconvenient for himself, as David's uncle-in-law.

Hedrick laughed savagely. "Yer mighty right, this ain't no place fer him. Hit's jest erbout es good er place fer him as Hell is fer er powder mill," he said.

"Wonder will Dave lay fer him when he knows?" Johnson debated still with feeble peevishness.

Again Hedrick regarded him with extreme contempt.

"Es I recollect that hunt," he said, "Alderson Cree died with Dave er promisin' him he wouldn't fergit. An' reckon we all know what it was he was goin' ter remember."

"Well," Orin remarked, "I certainly would hate ter see Dave git hisself inter trouble now, after all ther scuffle he's hed, an' him so likely too."

"I allers did think," Johnson went on, "that hit was er right unthoughted thing er Alderson ter make Dave go promisin' hisself inter trouble that erway."

"Well, I reckon when you've jest been shot in ther back by er feller, yer don't allers hev time ter look at things from every pint," Hedrick replied.

"I wonder won't ther fellers git tergether ergin an' run Kip out?" Orin deliberated, one eye cocked questioningly on Hedrick, for he remembered that ten years ago Hedrick had been chief mover in the "running out" of Kip Ryerson.

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"Reckon ther fellers'll think this time that Dave's old ernough ter 'tend ter his own business," Hedrick answered pointedly, and Orin drew a sigh of relief.

Lloyd Johnson gathered his long legs under him and rose. "I must be travellin' sure 'nough now," he said, "I wouldn't be er bit surprised ef my woman wa'n't erwaitin' supper fer this very package er sody."

Hedrick watched his departing figure disappear around the turn.

"I could er tole him his wife was erwaitin' fer that there sody two hours ergo," he said; "but I didn't do hit cause I knowed Mis' Johnson'd be sure ter tell him herself when he got back, an' do hit er heap sight better'n I could. He's been er settin' here fer ther last two hours, jest er looking' at ther face er Drupe Mountain, an' spittin' every now an' then. An' reelly ther's times when I think he's er fool fer want er sense."

"He's gone home lickerty-split now ter tell his wife," Orin said.

"Well, his wife's got ther sense ter hold her tongue an' ter make him hold his'n. She was er Cree, an' whatever else Crees is they ain't fools."

"Cept when they marries fools," Snyder interposed. "It allers beats me what kind er men sensible women sometimes marries."

"Well, hit's jest es well they do," Hedrick rejoined philosophically. "Fer ef fools jest married fools, think what er all fired lot er little fools we'd hev ter put up with."

"Well, I'm powerful oneasy fer Dave, but settin'

here won't help him none," said Snyder, "an' I've got er wife myself at home, an' reckon hit 'd be jest es well fer me not ter keep her waitin' fer supper beyond er certain pint."

Left alone on his deserted porch, with the evening closing in around him, and mysterious lights gathering on the crest of Drupe Mountain, the little store-keeper still sat on, whistling a faint tune which was almost lost in the near-by throaty voice of a tree toad. Presently his hound came stiffly up on to the porch and stood looking wistfully into his face.

"Reckon you think hit was time you an' me was thinkin' erbout our supper too," Hedrick said, answering the dog's appealing eyes. "Well, we ain't got no wife ter keep waein' so's we kin jest suit ourselves."

He put out one hand and pulled the dog's long, floppy ears gently.

"I'd hate ter see Dave Cree git hisself into trouble, Toby," he said thoughtfully, taking the dog into his confidence. "But dunno's there's anything I kin do ter help hit, seein' es he's er growd man now an' not er little pitiful boy no mo'. Hit don't seem ter me, Toby," he went on, "that ef ther Lord'd ever saw fit ter give me er child that I'd ever er hated any other feller ernough ter lay sech er promise on my son. But I dunno," he paused — "I reely dunno, when yer shot in ther back hit would certainly make er difference. I ain't never had er son an' I ain't never been shot in ther back, so's I ain't got what you might call experience,

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an' without experience no one's got er right ter judge emother feller."

He sat on a little longer in the gathering dusk, the dog between his knees, both enveloped in the coolness of the evening; then he rose, and going into his little back room started the fire for his evening meal. There he found his stove door had developed an irritating trick of flying persistently open, and in kicking it violently shut every time it opened — which it obligingly continued to do — he gained some little relief from his kind-hearted perplexity over David Cree's future.

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CHAPTER XI

ANOTHER CORN-FIELD

THE planting of corn on a bright day with plenty of companions to help, and to shout gay remarks to, and with the prospect of a good supper just at sundown to meet the whetted appetite, is a gay and an altogether delightful task, comprising an easy division of labour, in which no one is too hard worked, yet filled with a sufficiency of toil so that each of the labourers at sunset may have a satisfied feeling of self-congratulation over energy put forth and, as a result, a good day's work gloriously accomplished.

Such a day of happy corn-planting was Robert Reddin's; but Ellen Daw's was a different matter. There one lonesome girl plodded over the ground by herself, toilsomely planting one wearily long furrow after another; and then returning to her old horse—who waited patiently by the furrow last covered—she grasped the plough handles and again started on her difficult trip across the field, arduously covering what she had dropped.

Ellen Daw's corn-field was not a large one, in fact it was scarcely half the size of Robert Reddin's; but it seemed a large, a painfully, impossibly, large, place for one girl to go over all alone.

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She paused every now and again in the centre of it, to look about her and measure the unplanted ground ahead; and each time she did so she felt as though she and the old horse — the only other living thing to be seen — had grown smaller and less able to accomplish anything, and the field bigger and rougher and more forbidding; and each time, too, the enormous blue arch of the sky seemed more than ever overpowering and ominously vast.

It was the first year that so much of the burden of the spring planting had fallen upon her. Silas Daw had never before been so disabled by rheumatism that he could not do at least some of the ploughing; but this year he could only get about a little, with the aid of two sticks; therefore Ellen faced the heavy problem of seed-time alone.

She had managed to hire help for the first ploughing but afterwards the laying off, the dropping, and covering, all fell to her to do.

This was the second day of her planting and she had been at it since early morning, with only a little space out at noon, when her dinner had been meagre and unsatisfactory, and when most of her time had been taken up attending to the old horse's feeding. It was drawing now towards three o'clock — the hottest part of the day, when the field gave up dazzling waves of heat, and when the heart of the world seemed to have stopped beating in very exhaustion, and still an oppressively wide stretch lay unplanted before her.

Ellen felt as though she had been turned into a bit

of dumb machinery to go endlessly up and down those long furrows. Occasionally she took off her sunbonnet, and pausing fanned herself with it, and when she did so the hot earth before her dazed eyes seemed jumping up at her; and afterwards the going on again was worse than before, for each little stop seemed to put the aching mechanism of her body more and more out of order.

At length, stumbling back across the field to start her plough again, she felt herself growing suddenly giddy and strangely faint. She paused by one of the fence corners, stretching out her hands to its grey rails for support, for waves of dizziness were engulfing her, and the light was black before her eyes, with flashing half moons of whiteness swirling across it.

"I got ter rest er little spell — jest er little," she pleaded whisperingly to herself, "I got ter rest. I don't keer ef I never git this ole field done. I don't keer ef we all starve. I'd ruther starve'n be so tired anyhow, I believe."

Slowly she sank down on to the pie-shaped wedge of earth in the fence corner. It was deliciously shady there, and little flowers were about in tiny clumps.

"O Lord!" Ellen murmured as the restful earth received her. "O Lord! ain't hit good ter set down jest fer er spell?"

She put her sunbonnet against the rails and let her head fall back on that for a pillow. Not a very comfortable position, perhaps, but she was so exhausted that any position of rest seemed good.

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"So tired - so tired!" she breathed. "I'm er goin' ter take er rest ef I die fer hit."

She snuggled herself a little further into the fence corner, drawing long, happy breaths of relief. What a delightfully cool little spot it was after the hot field, and how quiet! It was a haven of rest; all the more pleasant because she well knew she could but ill afford to snatch even these few moments to enjoy its sweet repose.

But what is more heaven-sent than five minutes of stolen respite for tired limbs?

"I don't keer, I don't keer," she whispered in defiance, then smiled softly at the thought that the next few minutes were her very own, anyway, out of all the long past, and probably future, years of insistent labour. Her body relaxed contentedly, and all at once, though she had only meant to rest for a few minutes, she was profoundly asleep.

In the hot sunshine the upturned ground lay as before, silently expectant of its seed; and the old horse across the furrows still stood patiently awaiting the command to go on, the plough at her heels, and her long tail switching indolently at the flies.

Ten minutes, fifteen, twenty, drifted over the mountain-top and the sleeping girl. At length the old horse raised one foot tentatively, then another; then she took a few uncertain steps. Nothing happened. The plough dragged heavily behind her with a tell-tale clank, but still no one shouted at her to stop. She paused again with back-pricked cars, nervously await-

ing the first word of angry remonstrance to her progress. As a colt Silas Daw had broken her to harness; and he had done so with such a lavishment of hard beatings and of oaths that the mare never forgot it, and though now her coltish days were gone very far into the past, and of late Ellen had been her sole driver, she still lived in perpetual dread of provoking that terrible unlooked for rain of blows and oaths. Therefore her runaway progress across the field was a slow one, broken by frequent pauses to listen with timidly apprehensive ears.

Just a little distance off was a low bank, green with juicy spring things and wild grass. Slowly and cautiously the old mare clanked across the field, making for this succulent feast, and at length arriving at it, after one warm inquiring breath, which made the poor little doomed things shiver all over, she plunged her eager nose into the inviting greenness, and again — except for her contented munching — all was quiet on the mountain-top.

Ellen in her fence corner slept on as peacefully as though the fullness of the earth was hers to take if she but stretched out her hand for it, instead of just the scantiest livelihood, and that only procurable through perpetual labour.

Her head thrown back against the fence showed the pretty youthful curve of her throat under her chin; her face had settled softly into restful lines, and for the moment the girl was as happy as any princess; for, thank heavens! the grace of sleep is, that it is as ob-

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tainable by the poor as by the rich — fancy if it were not so, and had to be purchased like food and clothing!

It was infinitely quiet and far-away up there on Drupe Mountain. The girl slept on and the old horse munched the torn grasses with keen relish, and over all brooded a feeling of weary peace.

But presently across that maked tranquillity there struck a whistle, gay, insistent, and full of life. Occasionally it followed the air of first one song and then another for a few careless bars, but for the most part it meandered on tuncless except for the radiant tune of sunshine and spring days. From low blue notes of sweetness it went up and up, soaring spirally to transcendent heights of piercing shrillness, to be lost in silence and then begin all over again on the blue notes.

The old horse stopped eating and paused in guilty expectancy.

The whistle wove itself like a bright streak of light through Ellen's dreams, and she thought she saw David Cree go whistling down a little woody path, all flower lit, to Mary Reddin, who stood at the end of it, in a glory of sun-shine, and waved her hand to him, laughing, with all her gay mockery of manner.

The sound was very close now, but save for weaving itself into her dreams it did not disturb Ellen's sleep, and all at once it ceased abruptly as Adrian Blair—the whistler—emerged from the woods and looked across the empty corn-field in surprise.

His gaze rested first upon the old mare, and guessing easily enough, from her air of nervous apprehension,

that she was out of bounds, he was just on the point of shouting "Ha-a you!" at her severely, when his eye suddenly fell upon Ellen Daw's sleeping figure, as glimpsed between the fence rails. Silently he crept down the fence row until he stood at her corner and could peep over at her. The girl slept in an absolute abandonment of exhaustion, her sunbonnet fallen on the grass beside her, and her bag of seed corn spilling out its yellow grains close by.

Adrian Blair, a stalwart young fellow in his prime of youth and strength, who scarcely knew what it was to be utterly weary, looked at her for a few moments, taking in the whole scene; then he murmured softly to himself, "Po' little thing, she's clean beat out."

For a little space longer he gazed, and then silently he climbed over the fence, and with extreme caution reached slowly for the bag of corn. He had it firmly by the neck, and was about to heave it up to his arm, when Ellen stirred slightly and muttered inarticulately in her sleep. Adrian paused as though he had been caught stealing, and his good humoured, somewhat comical face took on a look of droll apprehension, as he watched her breathlessly.

But Ellen did not open her eyes, and presently, with a few heavy sighs, she once more fled down the shadowy aisles of deep sleep. With a silent mirthful chuckle of relief, Adrian caught up the bag and, stepping carefully, made his way across to the mare, and righting the plough, and turning it round, began with quiet driving to cover the furrows that Ellen had last sown; and

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when these were done, glancing at the girl and seeing her still asleep, he laughed again to himself, and planted more rows, covering them in turn; and then more again, until when the sun sloped to five o'clock there was only a little stretch of the field left unplanted. At five o'clock Ellen stirred softly and awoke. She did not at once open her eyes, trying to guess dreamily where she was. The sun now shone full in her face, and beating through her closed lids made the blood in them hang before her eyes like a crimson curtain, and she felt as though she were alone in a warm shut away room, all in red.

Suddenly she was aroused from her still half dreamy state by a man's voice —"Whoa haw —! haw there!" it cried.

Adrian for the moment had forgotten her, and let out his voice in all its accustomed energy and vigour of tone over some more than usually irritating bit of stupidity on the old mare's part.

At the words, Ellen struggled to her feet in astonishment. Looking across the field she caught sight of his lusty figure ploughing at the further end of it.

He was tall and strong looking, and for one wild moment, scarcely yet thoroughly awake, Ellen thought it was David Cree, and her heart gave a sudden stifling bound. The next instant she saw that it was Adrian Blair, and though her agitation subsided a little she was still overwhelmingly surprised. And as she looked at his stalwart figure going steadily over the field, and accomplishing so easily what a few hours age had

seemed such an impossible burden to herself, a quick throb of gratitude rose in her throat, and catching up her sunbonnet she ran hastily across the field to him, meaning to pour out all her eager thanks. Yet when she came up with him, and he turned round and greeted her with a laugh, somehow, all at once, the cold wall of her shy reserve rose up as always, shutting her in upon herself, and all she found to say was:

"I certainly am erbliged ter yer, Adrian," and that little was said with downcast eyes, and with such a lack of cordiality, that her constraint communicated itself to Adrian, and all the usual easy flow of his conversation stiffened into hoarse self-consciousness.

"Oh! hit ain't nothin'," he said huskily. "I happened ter come by, an' scein' you asleep thought I'd see ef bein' in camp all winter hed made me fergit what ploughin' was like."

"Yer're awful good," Ellen said, standing awkwardly before him, still with dropped eyes, and inwardly hating herself for her frozen stiffness.

And again he repeated, "Oh! hit ain't nothin'," and played with the plough line to hide his embarrassment.

"You go on back an' take ernother nap, an' I'll hev ther whole thing knocked out by thei time you wake up ergin," he urged presently.

"I ain't tired any mo'," Ellen answered, still constrainedly.

"All right then; you go on an' plant, an' betwixt us we'll git this ole field finished up d'rectly," he said, recovering something of his buoyancy, for even Ellen's

shyness could . A long have a repressive effect upon him, and in the face of action his awkwardness began to drop from him.

Obediently and still in silence Ellen took up the bag of seed corn, and began her journey once more across the furrows. But now, how different it all was!

The vigour of the afternoon coolness had begun to creep into the air; her listless steps took on a certain lightness, and with some one to follow her with the plough, com-planting seemed all at once the happy occupation, touched with the miracle of spring, that it should of right be, and no longer a burden of endless toil — for such is the grace of companionship.

As for Adrian, the world as well seemed to go merrily with him. After the first row or two of silence, the last shreds of his shyness melted away, and he broke forth into a continuous flow of volubility - snatches of song, scraps of tune pursued to a shrill climax; ridiculous remonstrances and adjurations addressed to the old mare, and even bits of gay banter directed at Ellen herself; and to her own surprise, Ellen found herself more than once smiling irresistibly at his stream of vivacity, which seemed just the radiance of the spring weather put into words. And dimly, though her unanalytical mind failed to put the thought into actual form, she wondered if the world after all was a place in which one might laugh, instead of a long succession of sombre days where was only the dull ache of a lonely heart.

Three quarters of an hour of steady work and the

field was done, and lay in the long reach of the afternoon shadows a prophecy of growth and bourgeoning, written in tender shades of sepia.

"Gee!" cried Adrian, dropping the plough handles and stretching his long arms; "that ole horse er yourn's got er mouth like er sawmill, an' she's jest erbout es hard-headed an' contrary."

For a moment his geniality melted the frozen chill of Ellen's manner, and coming up with the now almost empty seed bag limp across her arm, she paused before him.

"I certainly am erbliged ter yer, Adrian," she said.

It was the same short sentence that she had used before, only this time she smiled prettily at him, her eyes alight with gratitude, and her shyness was only evidenced by a faint reddening of her cheeks.

Adrian looked at her an instant quickly, and nothing of the softening of her face, which brought out all her dark beauty, was lost upon him.

"Then ef yer erbliged ter me," he said, dropping down to the grassy bank at the edge of the field, "Set down here fer er spell and let's talk," and his pleasant grey eyes began to dance with a light that was not all laughter.

But Ellen's fatal reserve was already stealing back upon her, and she shook her head.

"I -- I -- can't," she stammered, "I got er whole heap er things ter do."

"Then don't do 'em," he counselled buoyantly. "Things that yer hev ter do is er lot mo' interestin'

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when yer leave 'em undone"; and suddenly putting up his hand he drew her down to the bank beside him, though she tried to resist.

At his touch Ellen's face went a painful scholet, and she stiffened all over with confusion. She settled herself primly on the bank, very conscious of her faded skirt and old patched shoes, and once more her tense embarrassment chilled Adrian, and again silence reigned between them.

"How's ther ole folks?" he ventured at length, dropping back into conventionality, his voice hoarse again.

"Mammy's jest like she allers is; and Pappy's terrible crippled up with ther rheumatiz," she answered, fiddling with her sunbonnet strings.

"You'd orter hev somebody ter help yer," he said kindly, "hit's too much for any girl ter hev ter do."

"Oh! I kin manage some way," Ellen answered stiffly; but his sympathy lifted a little the veil of hard shyness, and this time the silence did not last such a painfully long time, and was even broken by her.

"What's ther news in ther Draft?" she ventured, her heart beating quicker at the sound of her own voice.

"Ther ain't none es I knows on," Adrian returned. "Yes, though, ther is," he added, and then paused abruptly. "Ther's er right big piece er news," he said, "but hit ain't ter be talked of. Ef I tell you, will yer promis' not ter tell?"

Ellen nodded. "I ain't ver likely ter see anybody

ter tell erway up here on ther mountain," she said, something of her self-consciousness lost in her interest in what he had to say.

"That's so," Adrian assented. "Well, then — Kip Ryerson's come back!"

"Kip Ryerson?" Ellen repeated in question.

"Yes, ther feller they say shot Dave Cree's father. They seed him at ther sto' yesterday."

At his words Ellen drew a sharp, deep breath, and her face went white. "Oh!" she cried in terror. "Oh! der yer reckon he'll do anything ter Dave?" Forgetful of herself she leaned eagerly toward Adrian, and her dark eyes were full of fear.

For a moment Adrian looked at her in surprise, then he spoke harshly. "What makes you look that erway?" he demanded. "Is Dave Cree er sweetheart er yourn?"

Ellen's pale face burnt suddenly crimson with mortification, and she shrank away from him as though he had struck at her.

"Er—er course he ain't," she faltered, her eyes bright with tears of humiliation. "You know very well he ain't. He's goin' with Mary Reddin."

"Then what do you keer ef Kip lays fer him er not. Ain't Dave big ernough ter take keer er hisself?" he said roughly, adding "Ef I was you I wouldn't be worryin' so much erbout ernother girl's sweetheart."

The words and the tone as well were insulting, stinging the girl like a whip lash. Instantly her self-consciousness and humility vanished, and in the face of

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the insult offered her she rose to her own defence. Leaping to her feet she stood before him tall and dignified, and unafraid.

"Don't speak ter me like that, Adrian Blair", she said in a slow, tense voice. "I keer what happens ter David Cree because I keer what happens ter any er ther folks I knows. An' let me tell yer this — I ain't got anybody in the whole world ter keer how I'm spoken ter, an' I ain't never had nobody ter keer, an' hit's taught me allers how ter look after myself, an' reckon I kin do hit still. An' I'll jest tell yer now onet fer all, that I ain't goin' tererlow you ner nobody else ter speak ter me that erway — I ain't goin' ter erlow hit — der you onderstand?" she demanded.

She seemed to tower above him, her eyes flashing and her breast rising and falling in deep angry gasps. She was no longer the humble shrinking girl that the Draft knew, she was her own true self, Ellen Daw, a splendid defiant young thing, thrown entirely upon herself and capable of defending herself against all the world.

For a moment or two she stood arrogantly before Adrian, her eyes blazing a challenge into his astonished ones; then she turned proudly away, and gathering up the bag of corn she laid her hands to the plough handles, and with a short word of command started the old mare toward the stable.

Adrian got quickly to his feet, and took the handles from her, guiding the plough carefully along, and lifting it over grassy places so that it should not cut the

turf, but he was too dazed by the vehemence of her outburst to find anything to say.

At the stable Ellen began undoing the harness, and Adrian helped her, but still neither of them spoke. Once, in putting up a strap, their hands touched, and Adrian's face flushed, but Ellen appeared not to notice it.

Finally she took the last piece of harness from the mare and turned towards the stable, but Adrian interposed quickly.

"I'm awful sorry, Ellen," he stammered, "I didn't mean ter say nothin' ter make yer mad, honest I didn't, honest," he pleaded.

"All right," she said calmly and coldly. "Hit don't matter. Folks don't often stop ter think whether I'm goin' ter be mad er not, an' sometimes I hev ter show 'em. Good evenin' ter yer," she added, and turned away again, but paused once more. "I'm much erbliged ter yer fer plantin' my corn," she said, and then passing him went into the little dilapidated feed room of the stable and shut the door determinately.

Adrian waited without for a few minutes hopefully; but she evidently meant not to return while he was there, and he was forced at length to retire crestfallen. He went slowly down the mountain to the Draft, and as he went he gave vent every now and again to a low whistle of amazement.

Inside the feed room, in the dark, with the door safely closed, Ellen listened to Adrian's departing footsteps, and when he was gone quite beyond hearing

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she put her head down against one of the feed-bins, and difficult angry tears rolled down her cheeks, and her throat ached and ached with the mortification of it.

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To the taciturn girl it was an unbearable stab of shame that Adrian had touched so easily and so roughly the secret of her love for David, which even within herself she had hardly more than glimpsed at; and for her having let him discover it she hated herself with a biting self-scorn and humiliation.

CHAPTER XII

THE DRAFT GOES TO PREACHING

Brother Braxton of the Methodist Episcopal church, South, had come to the last week of his pastorate of the souls of the Jumping Creek neighbourhood, and upon this first Sunday in May — the Sunday after the planting of the Reddins' corn-field, and of Ellen Daw's — in the little log schoolhouse of the Draft, he was to take leave of his flock and to preach them his farewell sermon; and more than one determined matron swore by her nine gods that she would hear that farewell sermon "ef she died fer hit, er ef (which was much more likely to be the case) she hed ter git up 'way 'fore day ter git ther work done up an' ther young uns all dressed in time."

"An' I'm ergoin' ef I hev ter take every las' chile Orin Snyder's got," Allie Snyder announced to Mrs. Sawyer, who dallied for a few minutes' chat on the former's small porch, in the cool of the evening.

"But maybe," she went on hopefully; "Orin'll want ter stay home that day an' tend ther kids," and she cast a glance fraught with sanguine inquiry at that gentleman's broad back, as he leaned over the fence at the foot of the yard.

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"Maybe he won't, then," Orin returned unhesitatingly, and apparently to Peter's Ridge opposite, for he did not turn round.

"Ain't I got er never dyin' soul ter save es well es you?" he demanded. "I'll tote es many kids ter preachin' es you choose ter load me up with, an' I'll sorter keep er eye on 'em after ther there; but ef you leave me at home with 'em — specially that youngest one — time you git back I won't hev no soul worth talkin' erbout lef' ter save, an' I wouldn't be no ways surprised ef ther was er kid er two missin' es well."

His wife looked at Mrs. Sawyer with eyes that said plainly, "Oh! these here husbands!" But she had the wisdom to bow to the inevitable, and remarked with a resigned sigh, "Then reckon every last one er ther Snyders down ter ther dog'll hev ter go, fer he won't stay at home by hisself."

But there were other fathers in the Draft more self-sacrificing than Mr. Snyder, who were induced to resign the pleasure of a chat with congenial spirits outside the schoolhouse before the preacher's arrival, and good-naturedly stayed at home with the smallest children, while their fortunate wives disported themselves at preaching, forgetful for a few care-free hours that they possessed anything younger than, say, six or eight years of age. In other families unselfish mothers remained behind; and thus the schoolhouse was kept from being quite inundated by babies of a tender, and those of a toddling, age.

But there were in truth few of the grown-ups, or

even semi grown-ups, who were not attended on their way to meeting by satellites of small people, who ran on ahead, lagged behind, danced sideways across the road; and if little girls, made wild excursions up into the wooded hillsides after spring flowers; or if little boys, conducted a strenuous and stony warfare against the unfortunate frogs who had short-sightedly selected the roadside ditches for their summer homes, so that all the way harassed parents and older sisters were under the necessity of keeping up a running fire of admonition, such as:

"Now, Ellie, you come down outer them woods, you tear yer cloes, an' anyhow I bet ther's snakes up in there." Or — "You Billy! Quit splashin' that water! Now jest look what yer done ter yer pants! What yer want ter hurt that po' ole bullfrog fer anyhow, he ain't doin' you no harm." Or again — "Oh, git out from under Pappy's feet — you'll git yerself tromped on." And so on indefinitely.

So that when they at length arrived with their charges at the schoolhouse, more than one wornout grown up felt as though his or her eyes had turned inside out in their heads and looked all ways of a Sunday from their efforts to keep three or four fleeting figures in view at once.

Preaching was to take place at eleven, and since ten o'clock little knots and groups of people had been going up the road, and likewise little knots and groups had been coming down it; both to meet at the foot log which spans the Jumping Creek near the school-

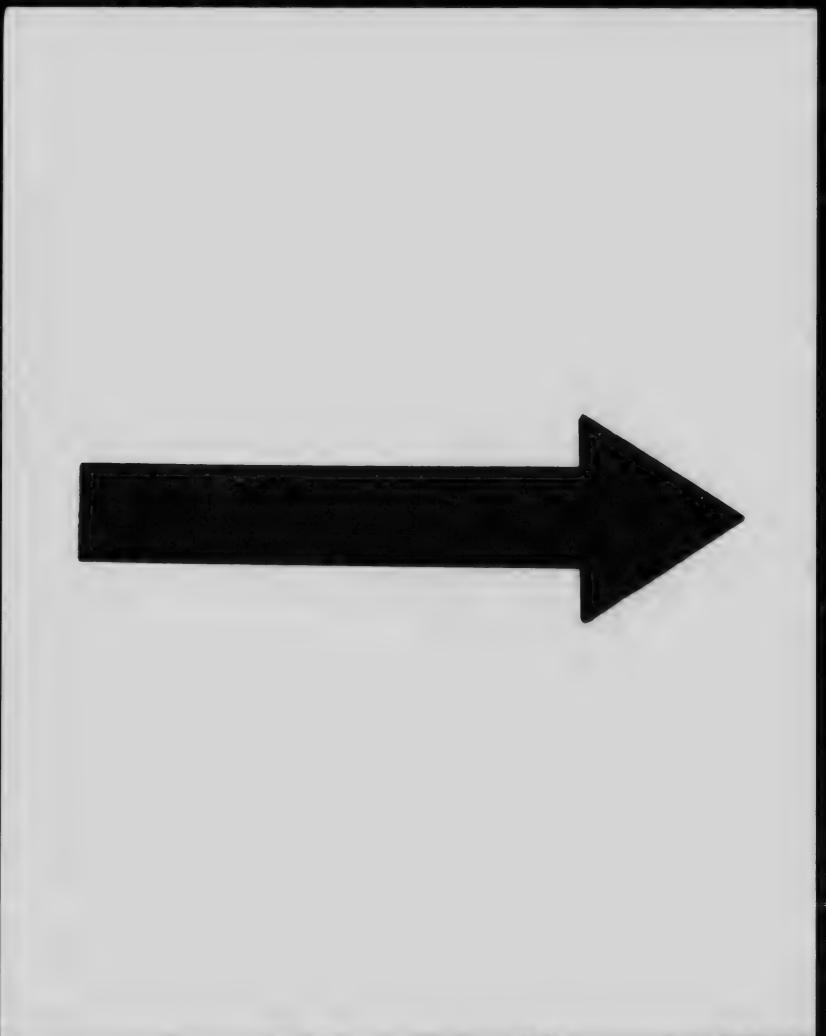
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house, and after the exchange of "Howdys," and weather remarks, all to drift across the log and up the steep bank to the hilltop where the schoolhouse is situated. Here the women presently retired indoors, while the men stayed without, lounging in comfortable gossipy attitudes under the trees, in no unreasonable hurry for the preacher's arrival.

From up and down the Draft, from the top of the near mountains, and even from over in Clear Creek, people came to hear Brother Braxton's farewell sermon, and to sing "God be with you till we meet again" for him. Some walked, some rode, and some drove in spring waggons and buggies; and the array of horses hitched to the convenient fence rows was imposing indeed, and before the meeting was over the unfortunate top rails were more chewed and bitten than ever.

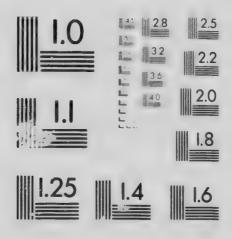
Ten o'clock saw Ellen Daw started down the mountain on her long tramp to the schoolhouse. She had been up since daybreak, getting breakfast, milking, feeding the live stock, setting the house to rights, and arranging a cold dinner for her father and mother, as she herself meant to take her own dinner at Mrs. Tompkins', — Mrs. Daw's sister who lived in the Draft, not very far below the schoolhouse, and who was always ready to give the girl a meal, even if no store of affection for her, or slightest interest in her, went with it.

Already Ellen was somewhat tired from her morning's work, and there still lay before her the long walk to the Draft. She was tired and she was disheartened



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for besides the usual weary hardness of her life's outlook, just now the hurt that Adrian Blair had given her still lay fresh in her heart, and stung her keenly whenever she let her thoughts go back to it. And go back to it they would in spite of her determination to put it behind her. Adrian's rough words, spoken as she supposed in contempt, returned to her mind over and over, "Is Dave Cree er sweetheart er yourn?"

A sweetheart of hers! As though Adrian Blair did not know, what the whole Draft must know, that no one was her sweetheart, or ever had been, nor in all probability ever would be!

And then, too, his quick guess that she cared for David! At every fresh remembrance of that, even all alone, her cheeks burnt and her eyes grew misty with mortification. Other things, too, combined on that Sunday morning to make Ellen feel with especial keenness the grey mist of her isolation and poverty. Her Sunday dress and sunbonnet of calico seemed more than ever faded and scant. They had never been of a pretty pattern, and had been bought by Silas Daw, dear knows how many summers before, at Linden, and now their original ugliness had bleached to a hateful bleary mixture of yellow and red, "That er skeercrow'd be ershamed ter wear," Ellen whispered bitterly, as she looked over the shrunk length of her skirt and down at her rough, clumsy shoes, made painfully conspicuous by the flimsy shortness of her dress. She had carefully washed and ironed the dress the day before, in an attempt to improve its

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appearance, because, for the sake of her hurt vanity, the had fiercely resolved to make herself look as well as she possibly could. But the endeavour was very far from a success, and when she looked at her dark unhappy face in her scrap of mirror, and surveyed her forlorn frock, she felt for herself and her whole

make-up an absolute, bitter contempt.

"I don't wonder folks lafs at yer," she said cruelly to her reflection. "I'd laf at yer myself ef I was ter meet yer as somebody else. No, no"; she cried passionately, breaking off, "I wouldn't laf, I don't believe I would, even ef hit was somebody else. I b'lieve I'd be sorry fer anything so miser'ble lookin'. I hope I would! Oh, I hope I would! O Lord," she whispered presently, "I wished ther was somebody out'n all ther world keered how I looked, er whether I lived er died. Jest somebody—I wouldn't keer who, jest so long as they keered fer me. Maybe then I'd git so's I keered er little bit fer myself, an' didn't think I was jest ther poorest an' homeliest thing in ther whole country."

"There now, there!" she cried after a moment. "I aint ergoin' ter think erbout hit no mo'. I know I'm ugly an' orn'ry, an' nobody don't keer whether I am or not — but I jest won't think erbout hit no mo'! I won't, won't!" she cried fiercely.

And yet, poor lonesome little thing, in spite of her determined bravery, she did think about it over and over again; and she might have stayed away from preaching altogether that morning, in her bitterness

and humiliation of spirit, save that she knew one happiness was in store for her there. She would be able to sing. And for this one bit of pure delight she was willing to brave all the covert glances of amusement that her appearance always provoked, and of which she was always so painfully aware. Moreover, though she scarcely acknowledged it to herself, she wished exceedingly to hear more particulars of Kip Ryerson's return, and to look at Mary Reddin and David Cree.

It was an intensely hot May morning and more than one breathless and moist individual hoped "there'd come er rain 'fore night." For a week past this procession of hot bright days had gone by, treading on each other's heels and making the farmers toil at their planting with feverish haste, one anxious eye cocked towards the horizon in fear of a possible thunder-storm. Every day had opened with dazzling clearness, and every day weather prophets had promised a storm before evening. But though each afternoon, round ominous clouds had boiled up out of the west in black heaps, so far no rain had come of them, or if any, it was but a thin veil of moisture, to be let down on the mountain peaks only, and to go drifting off up the river, by way of the high places of Drupe Mountain, without ever descending into the valley.

This Sunday was the hottest day as yet, and there was a certain breathless pause in the feel of the atmosphere, as though all nature lay in suspense over what might be coming, and in terror of the clutch of her own elements.

People gasped in the heat; mothers wiped their

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babies' damp foreheads, pushed back their hair, and borrowed their husband's hats for fans; while the little girls looked dejectedly at their wilted knots of flowers, faded almost as soon as plucked, and now but a limp remembrance of their ungathered alertness.

If Ellen Daw dressed for preaching with a dead heart and keen self-scorn, there was at least one girl in the Draft that morning who dressed in an eager, tumultuous delight, her heart as buoyant as a bit of wind-tossed thistle down, and all her thoughts on wings — and that girl was Mary Reddin.

She had a dainty new pink muslin to wear, together with a white hat trimmed with a little wreath of roses; which gay finery had been purchased with the money saved from her share of the egg and chicken branch of the farm industry.

When she was all dressed and turned to look in the glass — she had refrained from looking until all the pretty toilet was complete, so that the whole effect might burst upon her at once — the face which the mirror gave back was so sparklingly pure and exquisite that a delicate soft colour swept over her cheeks in surprise at her own loveliness.

For a moment she stood looking at her reflection, then she whispered softly, "Oh! do you reckon he'll like hit?" Whereat her face answered her with a tiny dimpling smile of reassurance. Then she caught up her pink ruffles and floated down the narrow boxed-in stairway, and out into the living room, like a rosy cloud that had gone astray.

At her appearance the members of the family who happened to be present caught their breath in Ohs! or gave vent to whistles, according to their nature, for Mary was the miracle and darling of the whole family. And as the Reddins abounded more especially in the masculine element, the whistles, as always, somewhat drowned the Ohs!

Mary stood among them for a few minutes blushing over their frank admiration, and trying to look unconscious as her mother fussed and pulled at her ruffles—not because they really needed pulling out, but because she could not keep her hands away from coming in contact with such prettiness, and because she did not think it would be quite right to take the girl in her arms and hug her, as she would have liked to do.

Bobbie regarded his sister in silence for a space; then out of the subtle observations of youth he remarked, "I reckon Dave Cree must be ergoin' ter preachin' with you."

"Der yer, honey?" she answered with elaborate astonishment. "Why, what makes yer think that?"

Which retort brought the laughter of the older ones upon Bobbie and made him resort to his disgusted and much overworked repartee of "Aw," a repartee which Mary wrung from him many times a day, to her own no small delight and to the general promotion of the gaiety of the Reddins. Upon this occasion, however, fate favoured Bobbie; for in glancing down the lane, he suddenly exclaimed triumphantly:

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"I think so 'cause I see Dave ercomin' now! A-ha-a Miss Mary!"

And for once Mary was covered with confusion and had to take refuge in his own embarrassed retort of "Aw"; and even the baby might have seen that she was blushing pink as she slipped away from them all and went down the little pathway to the gate to meet David.

Coming to meet him with floating ruffles, and airy step, she seemed to David such a dazzling thing that his eyes fell before her, and his tongue was thick and clumsy when he spoke.

"Aire — aire yer ready, sweetheart?" he said confusedly.

Mary came through the gate, closing it carefully behind her, and started down the lane beside him.

"I'm -- I'm ready, sweetheart," she faltered, in mischievous imitation, the face she lifted to him alive with merriment.

David's embarrassment melted at her words like the morning mists before the sun, and he laughed from a full heart.

"Yer ther very sweetest thing that ever walked ther earth," he said with deep conviction. He drew one of her slender hands under his arm, and looking down at her added in a shaken voice, "An' hit don't seem hardly possible that God's goin' ter let me walk beside yer."

After that they went on in silence for a long distance, Mary's hand pressed hard against his side, and their arms touching.

It seemed to David that in the last week the heavens had opened, and he had seen all the beauty and wonder of the world at a glance. Once before he had had a revelation that had shaken him out of the common ways of life, but that had been a revelation of the wickedness and hatred in life; and he felt now with a glad relief that in the wonder of this present miracle he might forget that old seared remembrance, that had taught him as a child how to hate with a man's passion. For certainly Mary's sweet gaiety was the very antithesis of bitterness. And probably in all that drew him to her, her sparkling vivacity had for him the subtlest fascination. At twelve years old Fate had torn from him at one clutch all his careless gaiety, and though perhaps thereby his nature was made stronger, it was with the strength of love and hate, and not of laughter. In the years of his dawning manhood something of lightness came back to him, but it was never the spontaneous gaiety of Mary's nature, and it was therefore that her sprightliness appealled to him so irresistibly, in very contrast to his own disposition. His nature was very strong and very deep, with undercurrents of passion only guessed at even by himself, and he knew always that his feelings swayed him more than ever his reason did. Moreover, he was the more intense, being as he was, untouched by the fleeting wing of laughter. Laughter, that wonderful gift of the gods that is at once the strength and the weakness of the world. The strength, because with one touch from it the pettiness of self-importance

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is crased; the weakness, because it can all too easily take the vitality out of deep feeling.

A little below the schoolhouse there is a tiny path which leaves the wide track of the main road and goes meandering up the side of Peter's Ridge, and like a truant child makes many a little turn and twist before it finally dips again toward the green knoll of the schoolhouse.

Most of the Draft people that day stuck to the road, for what was the good of walking a little way up Peter's Ridge just for the sake of coming down it again? Especially when the highway was dotted with cheerful groups of people all ready for gay talk and exchange of news, whereas the path was deserted.

But when David and Mary came to it, with one accord they turned along its green seclusion, and at the beginning of the way, when they were once safe within its solitude, David bent and kissed Mary passionately upon the lips; and again, about midway of the path, he kissed her once more. And each time she gave him back his kisses, her eyes shut and her face gone a little white.

As they came to the last bend that hid them from the schoolhouse, Mary paused in the path, looking up into his eyes.

"Dave," she said; "Dave."

"What, honey?" he answered tenderly.

She slipped her fingers down his powerful arm until they came to rest in his palm; there she put the other hand too, clinging to him like a child.

"David," she said again, and her face was almost tragic in its intensity; "O Dave! I'm so happy — don't let anything come betwixt us." Suddenly out there in the woods, where were only the hemlock trees and the budding azalea bushes to spy upon them, she leaned tremblingly against him, and her words came with almost a sob, "O Dave! I keer so much, I'm skeered ter think how much. An' oh! I'm skeered — skeered ter think something'll come betwixt us — an' hit'll kill me if hit does!"

David flung his arms about her, and pressed her hard against him.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart!" he cried. "Nothin' sha'n't ever come betwixt us — nothin', nothin', nothin'!"

For a moment more she lay against his breast and he could feel her shake all over; then suddenly she sprang erect, and gave him one of her elusive fleeting so iles, though the tears still hung on her lashes.

"I'm goin' ter preachin'!" she cried, "aire you?"

And catching up her pink skirts she whisked down the path, and round the bend and out on to the plateau of the schoolhouse.

And David followed her laughing — and oh! but the world was a wonderful place!

CHAPTER XIII

THE MEETING

BROTHER BRAXTON was late in getting to the schoolhouse and his waiting congregation on that farewell Sunday morning. Probably, as it was his last day among them, there were many of his friends to stop him for last words and leave-takings, on his way up the valley from Linden - which was the small village at the mouth of the Jumping Creek Draft. No one, however, was in any way disturbed over his lateness. It was, in truth, too hot to take the shortcomings of a fellow-being very strenuously to heart - even though that fellow-being happened to be a preacher, the usual free target for every complainer's arrow. Moreover, the later the preacher, the more time for the men to exchange gossip under the trees, and for the women to do likewise within the schoolhouse; while the children raced back and forth, from Mammy indoors, to Daddy outside, making thereby what might be called a running accompaniment to the general conversation. Here and there clusters of little girls compared their new hats, which Mammy or Daddy had bought for them at Linden, and criticized one another's sash

ribbons, or — dearest delight of all, to the heart of the small girl of the Draft — boasted of the wit and beauty of their respective baby sister or brother.

Small boys, now that Mammy was safely housed, pursued an excited and unreproved chase of various water inhabitants of the Jumping Creek; whether crayfish, frog, minnow, or erratic skipper — most difficult and elusive quarry of all.

Couples of young men and maidens idled across the foot log and up the hill, to retire discreetly to the shelter of the schoolhouse, where the women folk were more kindly unobservant than the group of men lounging under the trees. As Mary and David went past, a little low ripple of speculation broke out in their wake, during which Ellen Daw, with a shy "Good mawnin' ter yer all," slipped by the critics and entered the schoolhouse, glad that she should come as it were in the trail of Mary's greatness, and thus escape comment. Indoors she settled herself on a back seat somewhat oft in the shadows; but even here she was sensitively alive to the amused glances with which most of the girls greeted her appearance.

Outside the storekeeper stretched his legs to the utmost limit of their meagre length, and leaned his back luxuriously against the trunk of a huge oak tree. Having come early with forethought to his own comfort he had secured the friendliest position which the bole of the old tree afforded; and was moreover—as he loved to be—thus established in the centre of the group of men, who, having come later, lounged, per-

force, upon the grass in more or less uneasy positions, with no friendly supporting tree for their backs.

"I bet yer," he said, spying up at the heavens, "that we git er thunder-storm 'fore night. An' when she comes she'll be er everlastin' Jim Bruiser. Ther elements don't keep on er promisin' trouble like they've been doin' fer ther last week without somethin' comin' in ther end."

At least every second man in the group had speculated once, at any rate, on the weather probabilities that morning; nevertheless Hedrick's remark was greeted with the renewal of interest that is always the weather's prerogative.

"In my erpinion hits settin' in fer er long dry spell," Lloyd Johnson volunteered lugubriously. "An' ef hit does, ther corn'll lay so long in ther ground without sproutin' that frost'll be here 'fore we kin git hit cut."

Orin Snyder rolled over on his back luxuriantly, and looked up at the tender new foliage of the oak; whereat, one of the many and all-pervading small Snyders immediately came and sat down heavily upon him. Orin sighed.

"Ef you hed es many children es I hev, Lloyd," he said, "you wouldn't hev ter go es fer es next corn-cuttin' time ter borrer trouble. Git up offen yer Pappy," he continued to the youngster. "Run see ef that ain't Mammy callin' yer," he added hopefully. For a wonder his strategy was successful, and the small person rose and obediently trotted into the school-house. Orin drew a breath of relief and triumph;

but presently despondency settled once more upon him.

"Hit won't do no good," he said gloomily, "fer, fer every kid I manages ter send in ter her, she sends three fresh ones out ergin ter me."

"Yes," said Johnson, returning once more to the attack upon the weather; "I know hit's goin' ter be er long dry spell, fer hit's got com.nenced jest ther way hit did that spring three years back, when ther was sech er drouth an' then come that big storm. Der yer recollect of hit?"

"Recollect of hit!" cried Hedrick. "I wished I couldn't recollect hit. Why, ther's times yit, ef ther wind blows at night, that I dreams erbout hit. I tell yer, fellers, when that ole storm and wind went by me, an' I felt my store kinder trem'le all over, an' seed them two big hickory trees come down acrost ther road, an' ernother one sorter lean over like hit was goin' ter lay down on my roof, I thought my time was come sure 'nough; an' I says ter myself, 'George', I says, 'ther'll be er strange face in heaven 'fore night."

"Heaven?" Adrian Blair interrupted here with pointed interrogation.

"Yes, Mr. Blair, Sir; that's what I said, Sir. Ef I'd er meant—" Hedrick suddenly paused, looking intently up the road. "Look yonder comin'," he broke off in a low excited voice.

The other men, following his gaze, beheld a small group of lumbermen swinging lessurely down the road

toward the schoolhouse, and in their midst walked Kip Ryerson.

"Lord!" ejaculated Snyder.

"What's ter do now?" Hedrick questioned dubiously. At that moment a reconnoitring party of children dashed up the hill.

"Brother Braxton's comin'," they cried. "He's jest comin' round ther bend."

At the news the men got up from the grass, shaking themselves together, and brushing off their coats.

"You all sorter keep yer eyes peeled an' be ready ef anything happens," Hedrick said quickly to Orin Snyder and Adrian. "We don't want ter hev er fight here with all these women folks an' kids, an' Brother Braxton's last Sunday too. I don't hardly b'lieve Dave'll know him though, hit's been so long, an' he was so little anyhow. But jest ther same you all mind out an' be ready."

And somehow, when they all trooped into the schoolhouse, Hedrick and Orin Snyder managed to be in front of Kip, so that when David, who was sitting almost at the front of the house, looked around he saw only two men from Whitcomb's mill whom he did not know; and turning around again at something Mary whispered, he failed to see another man settle to a seat between the other two.

Brother Braxton made his way to the front of the room, shaking hands here and there with prominent members of his flock as he passed.

Arrived at the table, he dropped to his knees for a

moment's prayer beside it, and in front of the black-board's dark expanse, upon which there still remained, as relics of the past school term, a neatly worked out sum, and the word Peace, done in elaborately shaded letters, and unconscious irony, by the last teacher; left by her to stand through the summer months and be obliterated in the autumn when the new teacher would break that vacation truce with the first engagement of the renewed warfare of education.

"You will please sing a selection," Brother Braxton said, rising from his knees, and mopping his forehead exhaustively; and one felt it was with difficulty he refrained from adding the usual interrogation of the day—"Ain't it awful warm?"

At his bidding there was a general flutter of hymn books, and then after a short pause Ellen Daw, who had now moved up to the front bench among the rest of the women who sang, lifted her voice in the Coronation hymn. One line she sang through by herself, but at the next the rest of the congregation struck in tumultuously, almost shouting out the words, for it was a hymn popular with all. But through all the volume of other voices Ellen's was never lost, or obscured, but soared on like a stream of golden light, strong and unafraid. And as she sang she was no longer Ellen Daw, the lonely girl from Drupe Mountain, in poorer clothes than any one else present; she was anything and everything that she pleased to imagine herself. She was Mary Reddin, in her dainty muslin, with David Cree beside her. Nay, she was more.

She was a streak of sunlight, she was the blown clouds of a summer day; the light breeze that shimmers the tender green of the forest; the bubble of spring waters; the perfume of the woods in May; the leaping red tongue of a forest fire. She was any and all of the things of ethereal loveliness that she knew, and she was akin and in answer to all the rest of the beauty in the world. She was loosed from all her hard fetters of reserve; she was transformed and awakened; she was recreated and free. And all because she was doing the one thing in the world that she could do surely and well, and with delight to herself and to others, and in doing it she was born again. For in each of us is hid some secret treasure of ability, be it ever so humble; and when we find that ability, we find one of the doors to our souls; and with the finding of our own souls, we find God.

More than one person that Sunday morning stopped singing themselves that they might catch the better the beauty of Ellen's notes. And as Mary Reddin listened to her, she let her hand steal down under cover of the desk in front of her, and just touched David's.

Adrian Blair at the back of the schoolhouse silenced his own exceedingly good tenor voice, and fixed his eyes on Ellen's face during all the singing of the hymn, and when it came to an end he drew a long breath.

After the singing and the following prayer and reading of the scripture, Lloyd Johnson, as one of the church elders, rose solemnly, and with a conscientious air of self-importance took up the collection. He took it up in his own Sunday hat of black felt, and not the

least person in all the congregation was slighted, and for once one felt that his solemn make-up was in its element, and that for the taking up of the collection in the Jumping Creek Draft he had been destined since babyhood - nay, for this consummation had even been born into the world. It was a lengthy process, for more than one good lady, having nothing less than a quarter or fifty-cent piece, looked doubtfully into the hat at the meagreness of the amount already collected, shaking her head and holding up the coin to indicate how much change she required; whereat the hat was passed on, to be brought back to her every now and again to see if it yet could give sufficient returns to justify her putting in her half dollar and taking out most of what the hat contained. Finally, however, the last fifty-cent piece or quarter was successfully negotiated for, and every one in the congregation had had the refusal of the hat, even to those upon the last and most inaccessible benches; and Johnson, placing the contribution upon the table at Brother Braxton's elbow, sighed with a conscious air of duty well performed, nor did he perceive that his zeal had even collected from some dark corner a stray trouser button which disported itself brazenly and unashamed in the midst of the worthy assembly of the honest coin of the realm.

Brother Braxton, with one last and extremely thorough mopping of his brow, rose and began his onslaught upon the sermon.

Many of the younger children put their heads down

upon the desks in front of them, or — if their dimensions were extremely short — down upon older sister or mother's lap, and went serenely to sleep, undisturbed by the fervour of oratory poured forth above them.

The sermon was a long one, but it was also a good one, and reached more than one of the listeners; and when it was over and the preacher concluded with a few words of farewell to the people of the Draft, touched by honest regret, there was scarcely one among the older women present who did not have recourse to her pocket handkerchief, and many of the men as well sniffed in sympathy.

"And now," Brother Braxton concluded, "you will please sing, 'God be with you till we meet again,' during which I hope my friends will come forward and shake me by the hand in leave-taking."

Again Ellen Daw's voice rose, and the rest of the congregation followed her into the old hymn of farewell, "God be with you till we meet again"; sung over and over, while different members of the church went forward with solemn faces and shook hands with their departing pastor. He stood in a rapt posture, with closed eyes and extended hand, and body that swayed faintly back and forth in time to the singing voices.

David Cree's little sister Ellie, seated upon a front bench beside her dearest friend, Sadie Snyder, regarded the whole performance with deep awe and excitement. Child though she was, she had a quick sense for the dramatic, and loved to be sticred and have her feelings

played upon, and the unusualness of the proceedings—for she was not old enough to have been present at any of the farewells of the preachers that had gone before—stimulated and aroused her.

"I'm ergoin' up an' shake hands with him myself," she whispered to Sadie.

"Oh! you dassent!" that demure little maiden answered, scandalized. It was probably this very demureness and susceptibility to shock which made her Ellie's dearest friend; for if one is going to undertake daring things, it is almost necessary, and always pleasant, to have an easily agitated audience in attendance.

"I dare too," Ellie returned, rising firmly to her feet, and shaking out her short skirts. The little friend voiced no further remonstrance. As in duty bound she had made her conservative protest, and now, if Ellie still persisted, it was delightful to sit by with a clear conscience and see what transpired.

Ellie looked around cautiously. Her mother not being present it behooved her to have an eye to objections from older sister or brother. David was safe enough as he looked nowhere but at Mary Reddin. Her older sister, Susan, was just on the point of going forward herself, and awaited her turn in the line directly in front of Ellie with safely turned back. Fate seemed in every way propitious, and with a last flirt to her skirts she slipped out into the aisle behind her sister.

Her heart beat high with excitement, and delicious little thrills ran up and down her back. She was the

only child who had ventured to go forward, and what would happen to her for doing so was to her mind stimulatingly uncertain. What was it to be put out of the church? Would they do that to her? She was very near now — just her sister to shake hands and then would come her turn — and what would happen? Oh! but it was inspiring and delightful!

Then the whole line rippled forward a step, and she was directly before Brother Braxton. With a thrill she put out her tiny hand and, laying it in his large palm, shut her eyes for the skies to fall.

Her hand was shaken kindly up and down twice, and in another moment she was pushed out of the way to make room for the next comer — and it was over!

And that was all! No sudden thunder-bolt! No gasp of surprised horror from the congregation! Just — nothing.

Ellie came back to her seat by the expectant little friend, infinitely crestfallen.

"Tain't nothin' ter do after all!" she said, her bubble of excitement pricked, and she nothing more than Ellie Cree, her every-day self, sitting on a bench in an all too familiar schoolhouse.

The last person had shaken hands; the singing ceased, and Brother Braxton opened his eyes.

"Let us pray," he said; and in the confusion of the general kneeling down, he cast his eye over the congregation for a suitable person to call upon.

"Brother David Cree, please lead us in prayer," he said at length, somewhat to the surprise of all, for

David had only joined the church the previous autumn. But it was Brother Braxton's habit to encourage the younger members, and perhaps, too, something of David's expression had inspired the preacher to select him.

Surprised though he was, David knelt down obediently, untouched by embarrassment, and with a certain feeling of gladness that on the crowning day of his happiness it should be given him, with his sweetheart beside him, to voice the gratitude in his heart for the joy and the glory that had come to him.

Turning around that he might kneel the more easily between the cramped benches, he put his head upon the back of the seat, and free from self-consciousness poured out his thanksgiving. The words themselves were clumsy, and the sentences awkward, and oft repeated ones, but back of the empty make-up of speech was the vital spark of a man in the presence of his Creator. And the spirit spoke through the dead words, and awoke in the wornout phrases a freshness and fullness of life that flung them forth recreated and enriched by the vital essence of all things; so that his prayer found a quick answer in the hearts of many of his hearers — for a man cannot come honestly into the presence of God, and some of the rest of mankind not be gladly aware of it.

There was a moment's pause over the congregation as David concluded his petition, and rose to his feet. In that moment he stood up straight and tall among them, his face exalted and alight with emotion; beside

him the fulfilment of his love, and all about him faces of his friends, all touched in that moment it seemed to him, because of his own exaltation, with the fire of God's spirit. From one familiar face to another his eyes travelled joyously over the congregation, and then - then suddenly they came full upon the face of Kip Rverson — and with the meeting of their eyes he knew him. For one astounded moment David was still, and in that second in his revulsion of feeling it was as though the whole ocean had rolled over him. Then like a flash of lightning the uplifted look on his face went out, and with a hoarse scream, a blind infuriated animal, he flung himself across the intervening space and leaped for Ryerson's throat -- his eyes flames, and his lips drawn back from clenched teeth.

With a crash the men came together, and all was chaos. A struggling heap they went down upon the floor. Benches were overthrown, and women screamed in an agony of terror. Three men kept their heads, and those three — George Hedrick, Orin Snyder, and Adrian Blair — threw themselves upon David, and after a struggle tore him off his prey.

Ryerson staggered waveringly to his feet, a limp rag of a man with panic in his eyes.

"Take him offer me - keep him erway! I ain't done nothin'!" he panted, almost sobbing with fear.

"You git cleared outer here, quick es you know how"; Adrian Blair warned him between gasps, for David was threshing him back and forth, striving to

get his arm free; and with one terror-stricken look into that wild-beast face, Ryerson obeyed, and fled stumblingly from the schoolhouse. As David saw him go beyond his reach he leaped upon the arms that surrounded him like an imprisoned bull. But still the three held on.

With a quick twist he turned upon Adrian Blair, mad with fury.

"Let me go! Let me go! Damn you," he cried, beside himself with anger and struggling passionately. With a violent effort he wrenched his arm away, and struck the other full upon the mouth. Adrian went down flat before the blow, but with the spring of a cat he was on his feet again in an instant, his face dead white and his eyes all at once become very dangerous. Clinching his fists he squared himself before David.

"All right, Dave Cree," he said in a low cool voice; "ef yer want ter fight somebody, come on, I'll take yer."

"Lord!" gasped Hedrick, still clinging manfully to David's left arm as Orin dived for his released right. "Ef Dave an' Adrian gits ter fightin' now I'll jest plum giv' up."

But at that moment, through the circle of men, there burst Mary's little pink-clad figure, and flung itself upon David.

"O Dave, Dave!" she sobbed. "Don't! Come home with me — oh! please come home, honey!"

At her touch David ceased struggling suddenly, and

stood still. His breath came in great sobs, his face was flushed, with blood-shot eyes, and his hair was wildly dishevelled. He stood looking about him like a bewildered enraged animal, turning his head slowly from side to side, in search of an escape from the infuriating circle of arms.

Adrian Blair turned and walked out of the schoolhouse; and that he did not return David's blow was an evidence of self-control upon which he prided himself for many a long day.

"Come, honey! Come!" Mary begged feverishly, putting his hat into his hands, and drawing her hand through his arm with almost a mother's gesture.

At her words and touch again David looked down at her as though waking from a dream, and a little of the bewildered wild-animal look lifted from his face.

"Come on home with me, sweetheart, come," Mary whispered again, in an agony, and scarcely knowing what he did, yet recognizing the touch of her hand upon his arm, David turned obediently toward the door.

At this moment Brother Braxton saw fit to approach with pacific intentions.

"My brother — my brother!" he began portentously. But George Hedrick hastily interposed, warning him off.

"I wouldn't go er stirrin' him up ergin now jest es he's gettin' sorter ca'med down," he whispered nervously.

"I ain't stirrin' him up," the other answered indignantly, "I'm smoothin' him down!"

"Stirrin' up er smoothin' down comes ter erbout ther same thing when yer mad clear through an' ready ter fight yer friends," Hedrick answered with conviction, skilfully manœuvring to keep his small person between David and the would-be pacificator; and unheeding him, with Mary still clinging to his arm, David went down the steps of the schoolhouse and turned along the path, walking with unseeing eyes, stunned by the sudden stupendous revolution in his world and by the blinding fury of his own passion.

CHAPTER XIV

ADRIAN BLAIR FLINGS DOWN HIS GLOVE

As a bend in the path hid David and Mary from the schoolhouse windows, George Hedrick mopped his forehead in relief, and sank down exhaustedly upon one of the benches.

"Gee!" he panted. "I feel like I'd been dragged ter ther wood-pile and chopped up!" He felt himself all over carefully, nursing a strained wrist with especial tenderness.

The congregation stood about in agitated knots, discussing the occurrence, and endeavouring to steady their nerves into every-day trim once more. Mothers calmed frightened children, and husbands reasoned with hysterically inclined wives, while more than one beau of the Draft found the role of comforter to frightened beauty an interesting and fascinating one to play; nor did beauty seem adverse to comfort when offered in the reassuring tones of a manly voice, which protested that no harm could possibly come to that particular owner of beauty while that particular owner of the said manly voice was at hand — No, not ef all ther Dave Crees and Kip Ryersons in ther world was ter git tergither!

"Great Day!" George Hedrick took up his complaint once more; "yer don't ketch this here feller ever comin' betwixt Dave Cree an' anybody he's er mind ter kill ergin. Ef he's got ter kill somebody hit might jest as well be ther feller he sets out after, stead er a gentleman that happens ter be in ther way like myself. Doggone hit!" he lamented; "why ain't I got er wife ter keep me out er trouble? When Dave was er threshin' me round that erway, I wouldn't er got this sprained wrist ef I'd jest hed er wife ter come up an' smooth me down an' say. 'Now George, honey, this ain't none er your bizness -- yer jest git outer this an' come home with me an' rock ther cradle.' I'd er bin powerful glad er some excuse like that to er turned Dave loose. How'd you stan' hit, Orin?" he questioned, turning upon his fellow sufferer.

"Oh! I'm all right," the big man returned placidly.

"Kind er jarred up inside, but that's all."

Hedrick regarded his goodly proportions enviously. "You've got more heft ter yer'n I hev, an' don't shake so easy," he said. "Golly!" he continued, "but I was skeered Ed an' Bud Cree'd pitch in an' help Dave. Where was they anyhow?"

"Robert Reddin an' some other fellers got 'em sorter penned up in one corner, an' kep' 'em quiet, an' then ther sister got 'em ter go on home with her, when Mary got Dave ca'med. I don't b'lieve they knowed jest what ther trouble was no way, an' anyhow they ain't very keen fellers ter fight," one of the bystanders volunteered.

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"Well, wished I hed er sister seein's I ain't got er wife ter keep me outer trouble." Hedrick sighed, returning to his first grievance and still coddling his injured wrist. "But tell yer what, fellers," he said, suddenly dropping his voice and looking around to see that there were no Crees left in the schoolhouse to overhear him, "hit's er mercy Judy Cree herself wa'n't here. Ther wouldn't er bin much smoothin' down, I bet ver, ef she'd bin here an' seed Kip. She'd er sicked ther whole pack on him - I b'lieve 'pon my soul she would. An' of she had, by ther time Dave and Ed an' Bud got finished with him ther wouldn't er bin er piece er Kip Rverson left big ernough ter be worth puttin' in er crazy quilt. I ain't looked at Judy Cree's face fer ther las' ten years not ter know that much," he concluded with conviction.

"Well, my brother," said Brother Braxton solemnly, as he prepared to take his departure, "let us be thankful that it is now over, and grieve in our hearts that the peace of this blessed Sabbath day should have been so violently broken."

"Over!" said Hedrick under his breath as he watched the preacher go down the steps and out into the hot sunshine. "Over! This here little difficulty, in my opinion, wont be over as long as Kip an' Dave's both erlive."

At the schoolhouse door, after the preacher's safe departure, as each man made his appearance he was met and challenged by Adrian Blair.

"Any feller want ter fight?" he inquired genially.

"I'll fight ther whole shootin' match singly er in pairs. Aw come on, somebody!"

His eyes were alight with the joyous intoxication of combat, and he was wild for more. "Want ter fight?" he persisted, squaring himself with clinched fists in front of Hedrick and Snyder as they made their appearance together. The storekeeper paused and regarded his whole excited personality for a long minute in infinite disgust.

"No, I don't want ter fight," he returned disdainfully. "An' Orin don't want ter neither, so yer needn't go ter foolin' with him. An' what's more I'd think ter look at yer mouth yer'd hed ernough fightin' yerself."

Adrian put his hand to his swollen lip nonchalantly. "Jest tastes like more," he declared, sparring scientifically before them.

"Gee!" he exclaimed; "but I'd er give everything I own jest ter er hit Dave back ergin. But I kep' from doin' hit," he added with complacency. Hedrick snorted.

"You kep' from doin' hit," he cried. "Mary Reddin kep' yer from doin' hit, yer mean. An' I kin tell yer this much right now, Adrian Blair, whatever else yer may do you'll never make yer fortune as er peacemaker."

"An' ef I hed er hit Dave back," Adrian went on, ignoring the other, and his eyes dancing at the idea, "we'd er hed one er ther prettiest fights this Draft ever seed; an' hit would er took more'n you an' Orin ter git us separated."

"Yer wouldn't er hed me tryin' ter git Dave offen

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you," the storekeeper returned contemptuously; "one less fool in ther world wouldn't er worried me none. But ef yer was so full er fight, whyn't yer take after Kip?"

"I did foller him er right smart little piece up ther road, an' hollered er thing er so ter him, but onct he got started chain lightnin' wouldn't er caught him. An' from ther way he run I sorter think Dave must er skeered him up right bad when he lit on him all ter onct that erway. Oh! but Gee!" he cried again, "I jest wish hit had er bin me Dave jumped on"; and for want of a better antagonist he doubled up his fist and struck the schoolhouse door a tremendous blow, making thereby a considerable dent in it.

George Hedrick, who had started on, paused at this demonstration, and turned round.

"Now let me tell yer somethin', young feller," he said warningly. "You'll keep on till you'll git yerself inter trouble ef yer don't mind out. An' jest now yer're ther best imitation of er fool thet I most ever seed."

What Adrian might have returned to this hardly complimentary remark in his present state of exhilaration is questionable, had he not been diverted just then by the appearance of Ellen Daw. She was almost the last to leave the schoolhouse, and she slipped quietly down the steps, hoping now to make her escape unobserved; but the moment he caught sight of her Adrian drew himself up and took off his hat with a flourish.

"May I have ther pleasure of yer company home?" he said, bowing grandly.

"I ain't goin' home, I'm goin' down ther road ter A'nt Mary Thompkins'," she answered shrinkingly, her eyes downcast, and very conscious of the ripple of laughter his elaborate bow and request had occasioned among the group of young men, who, failing themselves to secure girls to walk home with, still loitered about the schoolhouse. None of them, Ellen knew very well, would ever have asked her, and she was bitterly hurt that Adrian should thus make her their laughing stock. Adrian, too, heard the titter, and spun swiftly round upon the group, his eyes on fire, and clenching his fists danced joyously up to them.

"Now then!" he cried, "any feller here ready ter take up my offer? Ef he wants er fight all he has ter

do is jest ter snicker onct more!"

He paused in front of them hopefully, but each one of the group turned away with a suddenly calmed and preoccupied air and an expression of being deeply concerned with thoughts infinitely distant from their present surroundings — for next to David Cree, Adrian was the strongest man in the Draft, and was by far the readiest fighter for miles around.

He paused for a short space before them, and then, as no one took up his challenge, he turned disappointedly back to Ellen.

"I don't keer which erway yer goin'," he said politely, placing himself beside her, and taking up easily the somewhat broken thread of conversation; "up ther

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road or down ther road's all ther same ter me so 'long es I'm in yer company''; and at the words he cocked one bright, defiant eye at the spectators to catch even a baby chuckle of derision. None came, however, and with an airy tread just touched with truculency, he swung down the hill and across the foot log by Ellen's side, and with her turned down the road toward Mrs. Thompkins'.

Adrian walked with a buoyant step, and every now and again he broke into a gay tune, whistled with his usual exuberant shrillness.

Ellen, on the other hand, walked with downcast eyes, in which were almost tears, for it stung her shy sensitiveness to the very quick to have been made so conpicuous. And in her mind's eye, as well, she could see very plainly the picture of her own shabby self walking down the road by Adrian, and she would have given worlds to have run away to the solitude of her mountain-top, where she told herself bitterly she belonged; and where she might hide, and try to forget the laughing glances that the other coupies of young people, dotting the road at intervals, bestowed upon them as they passed. She did not speak as they went along, but maintained a cold silence, and in her shrinking hurt mood she almost hated the gav personality at her side, with whom she was so dully out of tune, and who had so carelessly chosen to bring the eyes of everyone upon her. Moreover, her agitation and distress for Mary and David served to strike her dumb as well. She was appalled by the disaster opening so

suddenly before them at the very outset of their splendid happiness, and for them, and for her own wretchedness, she could have wept bitter tears.

Silence, however, was never long to Adrian's taste, and breaking off in the midst of a most elaborate succession of whistled trills, he turned to her with:

"Well, an' what did yer think of ther scrap? Did hit skeer yer?"

"No," said Ellen dully, "I wa'n't skeered."

"No, I bet yer wa'n't," Adrian said suddenly with admiration. "I don't b'lieve yer ther kind ter skeer easy. I mind onct at school when we was all little, my ole Tuke an' ernother dog got ter fightin' an' all ther other girls was skeered most ter death, an' hollered an' jumped onter ther desks, an' run ter ther teacher an' all, but you jest pitched right in an' helped us fellers ter git 'em stopped. Der yer 'member of hit?"

"Yes," she answered in the same indifferent voice, "I wa'n't skeered then, an' I don't know when I ever was skeered till one evenin' las' week when I was ercomin' home long erbout dark from Linden."

"An' what skeered yer then?" Adrian inquired.

"Why, when I got 'bout ha'f way up ther mountain, all ter onct I heered somethin' comin' jest er little piece up ther road 'round ther next bend, an' I do' know why, but hearin' hit jest up there out er sight skeered me good. Hit all seemed so kinder lonesome an' dark an'—an' kinder far erway ef anything bad was ter come erlong."

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"I bet hit did!" said Adrian. "What was hit any-how?"

"Why, when hit come erround ther turn I seed hit wa'n't nothin' but er man — hit was Kip Ryerson, but I didn't know who he was then. He was drunk an' he jest went by without seein' me, sorter blunderin' an' stumblin' erlong an' talkin' ter himself."

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"I don't wonder you was skeered out in ther mountains all alone; an' ef I was you I'd mind how I went erround much fer er spell whilst Kip's in these parts. Though really I don't reckon he'll stay round here much longer after that everlastin' skeer Dave give him."

"Der yer reckon Dave'll go fer him ergin?" Ellen demanded with a sudden awakening in her voice, and her cheeks in spite of herself beginning to burn with a slow scarlet.

Looking around at her question, Adrian saw the colour come into her face and noted the interest in her tone, and his manner grew suddenly cold.

"Ef I was Dave," he answered, "Kip shouldn't be let ter stay in this Draft. But I really don't know whether Dave'll keer ter tackle him ergin er not," and he threw into the last words an intentional scorn. Instantly anger leaped up in Ellen's face and she answered him like a flash.

"An' ef yer think, Adrian Blair, that yer er better man than David Cree, I kin tell yer right now yer mistaken," she said.

In a second Adrian's face was as angry as her own.

"I know mighty well you don't think any man's equal ter Dave," he flung back.

Ellen stopped still in the road and faced him proudly, and again, as in the corn-field, her shy self-consciousness was forgotten as she rose to her own defence.

"Adrian," she said compellingly; and Adrian also stood still and looked at her. "I told yer once yer shouldn't speak that erway ter me, an' now I tell yer ergin," she said low and warningly. "An' onless yer kin behave like yer orter yer sha'n't walk ernother step er ther way with me. I should think, anyhow," she added bitterly, "that yer'd come fer ernough now ter satisfy yer foolin' an' ter make everybody la'f at me er plenty."

Her dark face before him was quite beautiful as the mingled emotions of pride, anger, and bitterness went across it, and Adrian looked at her with unconcealed admiration.

"I'm awful sorry, Ellen," he said humbly. "What I said slipped out without my thinkin', an' I promise not ter do hit ergin. Though," he added gaily, his anger all melted away, and his serenity returning, "hit was worth sayin' jest ter see yer git so mad." At his laughing tone, which was half teasing and half admiring, Ellen shrank back into her shy awkwardness, and in a moment the animation died from her face, and she was the same stiff, frightened girl with averted eyes, as always; and though Adrian tried several topics of conversation hopefully, he succeeded in getting nothing

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more from her than scant monosyllables, and sometimes not even that, and at length even he was daunted, and fell into an uncomfortable silence, which lasted until they came to Mrs. Thompkins's, where he took his departure, as stiff for once as Ellen herself.

CHAPTER XV

A MATCH FOR LOVE

MEANTIME David and Mary walked home together in a silence which was half bewilderment on David's part, and on Mary's was dumb terror. They took their way along the same little green path and along the same pleasant road that had brought them to the schoolhouse such a few short hours before; and it seemed to Mary as though the face of all the world she knew had suddenly been darkened; as though in the twinkling of an eye the gaiety had gone out of life.

She had not recognized Kip Ryerson, but the moment she heard his name flung about in the startled crowd, she had known in a flash what David's sudden spring meant, and in the same flash she realized all that it would mean to her — for since childhood she had been familiar with the story of Alderson Cree's murder and of David's promise.

Under her gay Sunday hat her face looked tragically small and white, and every now and again a little nervous quiver went over it, yet for all her fear, her expression showed no weakness; instead, it was older and stronger than it had ever been, and she kept pace be-

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side David with a firm, even step, her hand lying compellingly on his arm with an unshaken pressure.

Guided by her touch, David walked almost unseeingly. His eyes were on the ground and his head bent forward, and he was like a man in a dream, dazed by the tumult of his own stormy emotions. His blood raced feverishly through his veins, and pounded like trip-hammers in his ears. All the reasoning power of his thoughts was gone, and the thoughts themselves were turned into waves of tingling emotion, which reeled distractedly through his brain in a chaos of surprise, hatred, passionate anger; the physical remembrance of Ryerson's writhing body under him; the tumultuous struggle with the men who tore him off, and again his mad anger; and all this tangle and mosaic of confused sensations reeled blindly up to, and culminated in, the touch of Mary's hand upon his arm, her delicate presence standing between him and his enemy, her ·fearless eyes looking into his face, her voice, and again her hand drawing him away. And as all his emotions were stirred and quickened to an abnormal degree, so he had never before loved her with such an intensity of passion - never so overwhelmingly loved, and never so terribly hated.

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Thus in silence the two came at length almost to the Reddins' gate. A little way from it David paused a moment, and with an effort threw off something of the overmastering sick confusion under which his brain was giddy, and like a man waking from a trance he looked about him in surprised question. Here was he

at the Reddins' gate, and what power had brought him down the road when the man he hated - the man who had murdered his father - had fled up it?

For an instant he stood still, realizing his surroundings and collecting himself, then he turned slowly toward Mary and took both her hands in a tight grasp, looking down into her eyes, and in silence Mary gave back the look.

"Good-by Mary - sweetheart," he said at length, and started to draw his hands away, but Mary caught them suddenly in a firm grasp of her own.

"Where aire you goin', Dave?" she questioned, in a

low steady voice, though fear sat in her eyes.

"You know where I'm goin'," he said; "you know, Mary. That was Kip Ryerson at the schoolhouse, an' you know - everybody in ther Draft knows what he done"; and again he strove to tear himself away. But Mary held him with such passionate strength that it was impossible for him to free himself without hurting her. Her face was very close and her eyes looke? into the depths of his.

"David," she said, and her voice was hardly more than a whisper, yet it was vehement with feeling, "David Cree, ef yer love me ther least little bit in ther world, you'll wait here a spell and think things over; yer too mad now ter look at anything straight. Jest stay - O Dave! jest stay with me er little, little spell!" she begged piteously. "Can't yer! Oh! can't yer Dave?" she cried, her breath warm on his cheek and her eyes beseeching him.

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"I can't, I can't, honey!" he said desperately — "I got ter go, I made er promise, you know I made er promise," and again he sought to "lease himself, but still she clung to him.

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"David, do yer love me? Do yer, do yer, Dave?" she cried insistently.

David looked down one moment at her anguished face.

"God knows I do, Mary," he said in a shaken voice.
"Then," she cried, "ef yer goin' ter giv' yer life ter yer hate, can't yer giv' yer love jest one little hour?
O Dave, Dave! can't yer?" she begged, her lips almost against his. "Don't giv' yer hate everything, giv' yer love one little hour," she breathed.

For a space David hesitated, then suddenly the full rush of his passion leaped up, and turning he caught her in his arms and kissed her hard upon the lips.

"Fer an' hour I'll wait," he said.

And Mary drew a long exhausted breath and freed herself from his arms.

"Come into ther house," she said in a weary voice. "I reckon dinner must be most ready."

At dinner, David ate in silence, with scarcely a word flung into the general conversation, which ran along ordinary topics guided there by Mary's anxious manœuvring, aided by Mrs. Reddin, who guessed with a quick instinct something of the situation.

The heat had increased and the atmosphere was lifeless and oppressive with the promise of the approaching storm; which, with the remembrance of the scene

at the schoolhouse, at which the older members of the family had been present, together with David's sombre face, all combined to make the meal one of embarrassed constraint. Yet for all that they sat long over it, delayed by Mary, who introduced one topic after another feverishly, for she knew instinctively that when they rose David would slip away from her.

At length, however, even she could detain them no longer, and her father pushed back his chair with a decisive scrape. David got up, and leaving the kitchen abruptly, went through the small living-room, and out

to the porch.

"I'm goin' now, Mary," he said, turning to the girl who had followed him. Without a word she turned back quickly into the house, and catching up her sunbonnet reappeared again.

"I'm goin' er piece er ther way with yer, Dave," she

said quietly.

He hesitated a moment, but in the end made no objection or comment; and together they went down the path leading to the yard gate, bordered on either side with the fresh brown earth where Mary had hidden the coxcombs, bachelor's buttons, maid in-the-mist, and all the little assembly of seeds that Martha Lamfire had given her.

David's face had lost its surprised bewilderment, but its quietness of determination was more terrifying to Mary than the other had been.

Outside the gate he wavered a moment, and finally turned in the direction of the path leading over a low

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ridge of Drupe Mountain, past the Hull graveyard. The same path that Mary had taken on her way home from Martha Lamfire's.

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"I'm goin' by ther path," he said; "hit strikes inter ther road nearer home than ther lane."

Relief leaped up in Mary's eyes. "Yer goin' home?" she cried gladly.

"Yes — fer my gun," he answered, and his voice was absent, as though Mary's presence were half forgotten.

For a moment everything went dizzily black before the girl's eyes, and a wave of sick fear engulfed her; nevertheless she kept bravely on by his side, and together they made their way into the woods. They walked in silence until they gained the crest of the hill, and came out onto the level spot where the burying-ground lies. "Dave," Mary said wistfully, as they passed it, and she saw the withered bridal wreath still lying on Amabel Lamfire's grave, "Dave, do you remember what happened here last week?"

But David gave no reply, and looking up at him Mary saw that her words had gone unnoticed. She felt as though he were slipping away from her; as though every step, though she kept even pace with him, was dragging them miles and miles apart. She put out her hand desperately and took hold of his, clinging to it; for somehow she realized her touch had more power over him than anything else. As her hand closed on his David came back a little from his aloofness, and looked down at her with a faint lightening of his sombre face.

"What was hit yer said, honey?" he asked.

"Nothin,' nothin'," Mary answered, not repeating her words for she knew it was useless. And again they fell silent; and again Mary felt the distance yawn between them.

At length they came to the last fence, where the path runs out into a steep little field, and so down to the main road of the Draft, which here it overhangs.

David paused, and turned to Mary resolutely.

"Good-by, swetheart," he said again, as he had said before at the Reddins' gate.

"Wait, wait," Mary panted feverishly. "O Dave! aire yer — aire yer goin' fer Kip?"

David nodded, looking down at her. "Yer know I am, Mary," he said simply.

"But, Dave," she faltered, a breathless terror in her voice, "they'll hang yer fer hit."

David still looked down at her in silence, and she saw that though her forebodings might be true it weighed not one whit with him.

She was like a little tortured bird beating its wings against its cage in a vain endeavour to find an escape to happiness. And at length, looking into his stern face from which the tenderness had fled, she cried in a sort of poignant astonishment—

"But, Dave, I love yer, I love yer!"

To her that fact outfaced everything else. It was the one great event of her existence—nay, it was her existence. And it seemed to her stupendous and unbelievable that David could place anything before it.

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At her words David drew her to him tenderly, and pushed the arching was and mists of shining hair back from her forehead.

"Sweetheart," he said softly.

But there was still that fatal aloofness in his tone, and with senses sharpened by dread Mary detected it. Suddenly she sank down upon her knees before him, and caught both his hands to her breast.

"Dave!" she cried again desperately, "I love yer!" She felt that she must make him understand that that was the first and the greatest fact—the only overmastering reality of their lives.

"I love yer! I love yer!" she repeated wildly. "O Dave, I've giv' yer all myself. Don't yer see that our love's ther greatest thing, an' ther only thing? O Honey! ain't hit right ter put love before hate? Dave, I love yer. You — you don't seem ter know what that means, but hit's everything ter me — hit's jest everything I am. I love yer! I love yer! I love yer!"

Passionately she fell to kissing his hands, first one and then the other, and pressing them against her breast, while she looked up at him with wide terrified eyes, shining out of her drawn face. Looking down at all her beauty and passion of love, laid at his feet, a great surge of emotion went over David.

"Mary," he cried, "I love ther very ground yer walk on! But I can't go back on my promise — don't yer see I can't, sweetheart?" he pleaded.

"Yer made me er promise this very mornin'," she returned in a low stricken voice. "Yer promised

nothin' shouldn't never come betwixt us -- have yer fergot that already, Dave?"

"God knows I ain't fergot," he said. "But I giv' ther other promise first. An' ther man I promised hit to died with me givin' him my word I wouldn't fergit—an' I giv' hit with all my soul."

"David," she said, "ef yer break your promise ter me hit'll kill me. O Dave!" she pleaded; "put yer love before yer hate. Hit ought ter come first — yer know hit ought." Again she kissed his hands, looking up at him with wet beseeching eyes.

"Put yer love first," she whispered.

David's face was tortured with suffering, nevertheless he spoke steadily.

"Mary," he repeated, "I can't go back on my promise."

At his words the tender pleading went out of Mary's face, and she got to her feet with a quick spring.

"No," she said low and fierce—"no, yer can't break ther promise yer made ter Alderson Cree ten years ergo—er bad, wicked promise—but yer can break ther one yer made ter me jest this mornin' easy ernough." Her tone was very bitter and an angry proud look settled about her mouth. "David Cree," she said, bending close to him, all the appealing sweetness gone out of her face, "I've laid my very heart an' soul at your feet an' you've jest tramped on 'em. Now listen ter me onct fer all—ef yer kill Kip Ryerson—no, ef yer so much as try ter kill him, yer sha'n't ever

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hev me. Do yer onderstan'?" she cried vehemently, her eyes flaming.

For a moment she looked into his face, her own dead white — then, with a passionate gesture, she flung his hands from her, and bursting into bitter sobs she turned and ran blindly down the path up which they had just come.

David stood and watched her go with a doomed look upon his face, as though Fate had slammed inexorable doors upon him.

Yet the woods had scarcely lost the last pink flicker of her gown, before suddenly they gave it back again, and in a moment she flashed forth from the green bushes and fled back to him, flinging her arms about his neck and clinging to him again.

"Dave," she cried distractedly, "Dave, I ain't really mad, I ain't, Dave! But ef yer — ef yer keep yer promise yer'll be er murderer. An' ef yer do hit, Dave — ef yer do, yer'll kill me!"

She lay against him exhausted and panting, and very piteous, the hardness and anger gone from her face, and all the tender pleading and sweetness come back again.

"Hit'll kill me — hit'll jest kill me," she whispered, gazing up at him like a pathetic child, tears upon her cheeks, and her eyes dark with terror. And looking at her for the first time David's face softened with a quiver of emotion, and he made a quick gesture, as though to comfort her with kisses. But the next moment he checked himself, and raising his hands he

unclasped her clinging fingers, and putting her resolutely from him, without a word he climbed over the fence and went slowly down the hillside; but though he went firmly and steadily, his head was bent, his face was haggard, and his eyes began to burn with an almost distraught light.

Mary stood looking after his retreating figure in an utter bewildered stupefaction; and the fact that in spite of everything, in spite of all her anguished endeavour, and her agony of pleading, in the end, her love and David's, that had seemed just that morning such an overwhelmingly strong thing, should in a few short hours have been swept aside by another passion as though it had never been, was to her appalling and unbelievable, and crushed her out of all her familiar paths of thought.

Could it be, was it possible that David, who had held her that morning in his arms with such an adoration of love, was going from her now to do a thing which he knew would tear them away from each other forever? Oh! surely, surely, her heart cried out that it was impossible. And yet—yet, there was David going steadily, inexorably on his way! Mary reeled dizzily against the fence, and sank to the ground sobbing in little low, heart-broken gusts, with the frightened pathos of a child who has had a glimpse before its time, of the pitilessness of the world. For in a woman the power of love is first developed, and that of hate comes later, born most often of the first. So to Mary Reddin, who had never known the taste of a real live hate, it was

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crushingly strange to find another force in the world capable of matching strength with love — an emotion which had seemed to her strong beyond everything else.

At the foot of the hill David turned to take one last look at the place of their parting, and in doing so he caught sight of Mary's figure sunk down by the fence - just a faint splash of pink showing between the grey rails. David stood suddenly still, looking up at her with a sharp desire in his eyes. In the silent appeal of her little broken figure, all her vanished gaiety and wistful, frightened sweetness rushed upon him, and called him madly; and that he who had brought upon her the first sting of suffering could not go to her now, and taking her in his arms shield her from it with the protection of his strength, seemed monstrous and unendurable; yet the way between them was barred by the demon of his promise, and devil ridden by it he turned at length into the road toward home.

But at the last he went barely a hundred yards along the road before he turned abruptly, and climbing the fence on the other side went away into the low bushes and undergrowth, and the still remoteness of one of the hollows of Peter's Ridge.

As Mary lay and wept — a huddled heap upon the moss-cushioned ground — she became aware of a slight stir in the bushes at her back, and knew that some one was behind her. Stifling her sobs, and springing quickly to her feet, she turned and beheld Ellen Daw standing in the pathway, and looking at her.

Ellen's eyes were misty with tears, and her strong dark face was full of compassion.

Mary looked at her a moment and then turned her gaze away. Below in the valley the curving road lay like a wriggling white snake, and from end to end of it there was no sign of David Cree — and to longing eyes an empty road is desolate beyond conception.

Mary turned back to the other girl with a poignant surprise.

"O Ellen, Ellen!" she cried wistfully. "Dave's gone — he's gone!"

"I know," Ellen answered softly. "I heered — I was settin' back there in ther bresh."

Then with a shy, constrained movement she opened her arms. "Po' little thing," she said tenderly.

At the gesture Mary wavered toward her, dropping her head upon her shoulder, and Ellen's arms closed strongly about her.

Mary was tall, but Ellen was unusually tall, with a frame almost like a boy's, and made strong by her constant farm work. In her arms Mary felt very slender and delicate, and her grief shook her from head to foot.

Ellen put up her hand and stroked her hair awkwardly, and pressed her head against her own neck, murmuring softly, "Po' little honey, po' little thing!"

She pitied her intensely, but it gave her a feeling of wondering, exquisite delight, as well, that this lovely little creature whom she had so adored in secret should be clinging to her now for sympathy and support.

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It was the first time that any one had ever sought her store of love, and it waked within her a very passion of tenderness, and a fierce, almost maternal desire to protect Mary from all suffering. She loved her with an exulting, triumphant love, and she felt as though the wealth and force of her love and compassion must fling about the other girl a sort of encompassing and protecting cloud of affection.

For a little while longer Mary lay still and let Ellen caress her, but at length she straightened up and drew herself away, pushing her hair back from her forehead with a weary, bewildered touch.

"I got ter go home, I got ter go now," she said in a stunned voice, yet with a certain quiet strength beginning to come to her. She moved a few paces away, and then on the moment came back to Ellen, flinging her arms about her neck and kissing her.

"Yer been mighty good ter me an' I love yer," she said simply, and turning again went slowly down the path toward her home, a desolate and pathetic little figure.

CHAPTER XVI

HATE PLAYS A CARD

WHEN David swung himself over the fence into the woods of Peter's Ridge, he felt as though a crushing and inexorable fate encompassed him on every side, and the tug of his different emotions, which dragged him now in this direction and now in that, drove him almost frantic.

He went a little distance up the gentle slope of the hollow, with indifferent stumbling steps, and at a secluded spot flung himself full length upon the ground, burying his head upon his arms; and the still woods, all suffused with the green mysterious light of afternoon, heard him groan from his heart, as a man only groans when there are no other human beings by to offer the pity or contempt of their eyes.

For a long time he lay thus; then he gradually stretched out his benumbed arms and dug his fingers into the mossy depths of the ground, his face pressed against its whispering coolness; and again for a long time he lay still, his love keeping watch over him on one side, while hate sat upon the other. The one came to him in the remembrance of Mary Reddin's tender, appealing face, and the other looked at him

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with Kip Ryerson's hateful eyes. Love cried to him in Mary's voice, "Oh! ain't hit right that love should come first?" and "O Dave, put yer love before yer hate," and with the cry it seemed to him he could feel once more the quiver of her clinging arms about his neck, and her breath upon his cheek; and hate taunted him in his own passionate words of ten years ago — "I've promised yer, Pappy! I've promised, an' I won't fergit!" And as the old promise leaped through his brain he matched it with the keenly remembered feeling of Kip Ryerson's struggling body under his own, and of his throat beneath his clutching hands. Thus love sat upon one side, and hate leered at her from the other; and between them David Cree lay upon his face and strove with himself to find the right way.

Yet he knew instinctively, in spite of all the strength of his love, that if Kip Ryerson were to come suddenly before him again, he would leap upon him with the same quick fury with which he had leaped that morning. For the physical presence of the man enkindled always within him an absolute overmastery of hate. And at even the thought of coming on him again, David half drew himself to his feet to go without further delay, and accomplish his revenge. But with the movement Mary's words came back upon him — "An' ef yer kill Kip Ryerson — no, ef yer so much es try ter kill him, yer sha'n't ever hev me." And again he dropped back upon the ground. So if he kept his promise to his father — a promise into which he had flung his very self — besides the wicking of his life,

together with possible hanging and almost certain imprisonment — he was to lose the love for which he cared more than for anything else in the world.

David Cree was not a man of subtle argument, it was more instinctive with him to keep his reasoning powers quiescent, and to let the strength of his emotions decide for him—in other words, he reasoned almost entirely by his feelings. If he felt a thing to be right or to be wrong he acted accordingly; but if his instincts failed him, or came together in conflict, he was bewildered and uncertain how to act, unable to argue it out with himself, or to draw precepts from other men—for right or wrong for other people was not right or wrong with him if his own conscience did not speak. And the whole outcome of his actions now hinged upon the question of whether his love or his hate were stronger within him.

The hate that he had lived with and nourished through his boyhood was a very intense passion, matched only in strength by his love — and that was such a newly acquired feeling that as yet he had scarcely guessed the power of it.

Yet whenever the hot waves of hate went over him and he would have risen to his feet, and securing his pistol gone in search of Ryerson, always some poignant remembrance of Mary came back upon him and restrained him. And though hate whispered that if he stayed too long in the woods his revenge would escape him, still he tarried, his hand stayed by love.

When at length he got slowly to his feet and made

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his way down the hollow, the afternoon had gone some distance toward evening, and what he should do in the next few hours he himself did not know; but for the moment his love was very alive within him, fostered perhaps by the long hours in the still remoteness of the woods.

When he emerged from the undergrowth, and stepping absently over the low fence faced toward home, he became dimly aware that the day's intensity of heat had abated, and that the promise of the storm was near its fulfilment.

The low rays of the sun struggled through piled-up grey and black clouds and strangely thick white ones, making an ominous background for the western peaks of Drupe Mountain, and darkening the mountains themselves to an expectant purple, streaked here and there with faint sunshine where some higher ridge caught a few wandering rays which transformed its gloom into a delicate effulgence of yellowish green light.

Sometimes, as the wind shifted the cloud ramparts, so that the sun looked through at ever changing loopholes, these tender streaks of light went stepping silently from ridge to ridge of the mountains like a wandering halo that had lost its saint — or like the unexpected smile of God moving over the world.

A light wind swirled hither and thither in uncertain gusts, silvering the new leaves with its breath, and sending little dust devils rioting away up the road.

The air was full of the looked-for relief of the storm

after the breathless oppression of the day. The frogs called with eager voices, and in the distance a rain crow gave forth its hollow prophetic note; and every now and again sharp tongues of lightning licked out from the banked-up clouds and sent a grey rumble of thunder artillery growling off into silence among the valleys and narrow hollows of the mountains.

Fer the most part David walked along the deserted road with unnoticing eyes, but once a nearer and louder thunder-clap than usual waked him to the present, and raising his eyes he took in the signs of the coming storm.

"When she comes she'll be er big one," he muttered. Then as the thunder spoke again more sharply he whispered, "Ef that's God's voice I wished He'd speak ter me. God," he cried suddenly, deep within himself, "I don't know what's right — show me!"

For a moment afterward he stood still, half expecting some new revelation of thought, but all remained unchanged, and presently he went on slowly upon his way again.

All that afternoon Judith Cree had sat upon the low step of the Crees' porch and looked across the valley and up the road with searching eyes, awaiting David's return.

She sat frozen to perfect stillness, except that every now and again her thin hands lying in her lap clinched upon each other with a hard tremor. Her face had lost its expression of dead horror — the expression that seemed as though with her mental vision she be-

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held always the calamity of ten years ago — and now was stamped with a burning look of live hate.

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Every now and then Susan Cree, her daughter—a pretty, delicate girl, a few years older than Mary Reddin, with wide blue eyes, and rather colourless brown hair—came nervously out onto the porch and looked at her mother in a frightened, irresolute way. Occasionally she asked her some trivial question, timorously anxious to break the spell of her strained, unnatural attitude. Judith answered her in monosyllables which did not lessen one whit the intensity of her expression, or else was silent altogether; and after looking at her for a little while with a scared, wistful face, the girl would go back into the house again, attending restlessly to the household tasks, only to come drifting back presently to the doorway, to cast more anxious glances at her mother's stern figure.

Judith Cree, unlike most of the Draft people, had not been at preaching that morning, but Susan, coming home with the two younger Cree boys, Ed and Bud, had told her of the reappearance of Kip and of David's having to be dragged off of him.

At Susan's words that Ryerson was still alive, a frightful look flashed over all her mother's face, distorting it sharply, and rising hastily from the dinner table at which she had been seated, she put her hands to her throat as though she could not catch her breath, and stood a moment staring into the girl's gentle, startled face. Then she took her hands down and dropped them to Susan's shoulders.

"Go on, go on," she crical fiercely, glaring at her and shaking her slightly to and fro. "Go on, yer little fool — when they got Dave offer him what happened?"

"Why then," Susan faltered, "Kip, he lit out up ther road, an' Mary got Dave sorter quieted down, an' made him come on home with her."

"Kip Ryerson went up the road an' Dave come down hit with Mary?" Judith cried with savage astonishment.

The girl nodded in frightened silence.

"An' what'd you all do?" Judith demanded, whirling upon Bud and Ed Cree — boys of sixteen and eighteen.

"We didn't know who he was first off, an' afterwards Mr. Reddin an' Jack an' one or two other fellers got betwixt us an' him, an' kep' us outer hit," the oldest boy answered sullenly for both.

"An' then I suppose you all come home with Sue," Judith cried with biting scorn.

The boys looked at each other but said nothing. They had never seen their mother, always so quiet and so cold, in such a white fury of passion, and it surprised them into silence.

Judith turned from them contemptuously, and striding to the door looked eagerly up the road. Seeing nothing she came back to the table, but in a moment she sprang up restlessly, and going out on to the porch flung herself down upon the top step and began her long vigil for David.

Again and again throughout the afternoon Susan

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came out to her, trying to induce her to eat something, or to come into the house out of the full glare of the heat. But her entreaties had absolutely no weight with her mother, and the girl's face grew more and more anxious. Hers was a sweet but not a very strong nature, and her mother's behaviour alarmed her excessively, and each time she went to the door to look at her she came back with a nervous tightening of her throat. Through the long hot afternoon Judith Cree held the same rigid position. Her attitude was one of crouching, as though the next moment she might leap furiously to her feet; her eyes were red and burnt from staring across the dazzling sunshine, and the outspread panorama of the valley seemed to her to have seared itself everlastingly upon her brain. It was a spring landscape that faced her now, yet to herself she seemed to be looking across the shining fawn-coloured fields of autumn, and to be met by the glory of the mountains in the full splendour of their October colouring instead of the soft spring greenery. For it seemed to her all to have slipped back to the fall of ten years ago, with herself standing happily in the doorway looking across the valley, her baby's head upon her breast, and her ears listening to heavy footsteps that approached the house from the rear. She seemed to be herself of ten years ago and herself of the present mysteriously combined. To be listening to the footsteps with her wonder of the past, yet to know what they were with the knowledge and hate of the present. Through the whole afternoon she lived this double

role of past and present. And with a curious trick of her brain - perhaps induced by the intense heat of the sun - she did not go over the past in retrospect, but seemed to be actually living over each succeeding moment of her life's catastrophe. In her dual existence of past and present, with heedless eyes she watched the sun drop slowly toward the west; the long black shadows creep away from it to the eastward, and the thunder-clouds pile themselves up across the horizon. She saw — without realizing that she saw her — Ellie dancing and pirouetting down the hill before the house, in mad excitement over the wind's cool invitation, and the exhilarating promise of the storm. Once or twice the little girl dashed breathlessly up to her, and snuggling down beside her on the step - like a darting bird touching ground for an instant - asked some gay, childish question. But Judith gave her no answer, and in a moment, disappointed at her silence, Ellie would flash away again on buoyant feet, her hair blown in long flying strands across her elf face, and her light skirts twisting and untwisting about her, as she danced and whirled this way and that, like some little mad storm sprite intoxicated by the call of the wind and the joy of young life.

The swallows swooped through the watery grey sky in mad twittering races, and in the distance the rain crow sent forth his blue note, that seems somehow in tone to match the wistful tint of the haze that overhangs the far mountains in spring.

The whole valley lay in the clutch of the melting

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afternoon light, touched to unfamiliarity by the storm, and at length, in this yellow mystery of atmosphere, Judith Cree saw David coming slowly up the long slope of the hill toward the house.

At the first sight of him she shot up to her feet, her hands clinching into hard fists; then her impulse changing, she sank again to the steps, moistening her dry lips every now and again, and holding the sight of him with burning, unwinking eyes.

David walked with head down, and he was almost upon the steps before he caught sight of his mother. He paused abruptly as he came before her, and stood looking down at her in silence.

Judith rose slowly, terribly to her feet.

"Is he dead?" she demanded in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper, and which held the concentrated brooding of ten silent years.

David's face whitened sharply. "No, he ain't dead," he said.

"Ain't dead — ain't dead!" she cried. "Why ain't he dead?"

"They took me offer him at ther schoolhouse, an' he got erway up ther road, an' I ain't seen him since," he answered.

"You ain't seen him since?" she cried, and the words leaped at him stingingly like a lash. "Where hev yer been all this time?" she demanded.

"I been over at ther Reddins' er good bit er ther time," David answered, a slow, ominous colour begining to burn in his face.

"You been over at ther Reddins'?" she said, a pause of scorn between each deliberate word. "You been over at the Reddins'—an' ther man what killed yer Pappy is erlive an' goin' erbout ther Draft," she paused. "But you been over at ther Reddins'," she repeated. "I hope yer hed er real pleasant time," she cried in slow, furious mockery.

David's eyes began to light with the same dangerous fire as her own, yet he answered low and steady:

"Mary Reddin says ef I so much es try ter kill Kip I sha'n't ever marry her," he said.

"Mary Reddin! Mary Reddin!" the woman almost screamed. "What's Mary Reddin?" Suddenly she broke off and imitated a child's voice with terrible sarcasm: "I won't fergit, Pappy! I won't fergit! I've promised yer an' I won't fergit!"

Again she paused, looking into his shaken face, then she stepped closer, clasping his arm with intense vibrant fingers.

"What's yer name?" she cried, her wild face thrown back, and looking at him from under halfclosed lids.

"David Cree," he answered in a strained voice, too overwrought and played upon by her passion to realize the strangeness of the question.

"David Cree!" she screamed, and sprang back. "David Cree! It's er lie—yer not David Cree! David Cree made er promise. An' he made ther fellers run Kip Ryerson out er this Draft. An' he tole me Kip Ryerson shouldn't ever go by this house ergin. That's

HATE PLAYS A CARD

what David Cree done. But you ain't him! You ain't Alderson's boy, an' you ain't mine neither."

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With furious eyes blazing at him she stood back a pace or two, panting. Then suddenly she held up her withered and twisted hands before him.

"Look at them hands!" she cried, and shook them in his face. "Look at 'em! Do yer reckon I'd er hed hands like that ef Kip Ryerson hedn't er killed Alderson Cree? Look at me! Look at me all over!" She straightened up before him, a wasted, drawn figure, old and work-wrung at forty. "Do yer reckon I'd er looked like this ef I'd er hed er man ter work fer me?" she demanded. "An' why ain't I got er man? Because Kip Ryerson killed him — stole up behind him an' shot him in ther back."

She was sobbing now, beside herself with hate, excitement, and the breaking down of long held self-control.

"Oh!" she cried bitterly, "Oh! wished I was er man!"

David laid his hand firmly on her shoulder.

"Hush," he said sternly; and beside her shaken, distorted passion he seemed very strong and very quiet. "Hush," he said again; his firm hand upon her, and his touch pressing her to silence.

He stood over her for a time, until her wild sobbing spent itself and trailed brokenly into silent, heaving breaths. Then he took his hand from her shoulder, and turning went past Ellie, who watched with a small excited face, and past Susan who was crying with

nervous fright, and disappeared into the house, and when he came out again he held his pistol in his hand. Still in silence he passed them all, and stepping off the porch went away down the hill, and by and by the dusk, which backed by the storm was almost darkness now, swallowed up his powerful figure from sight.

Susan sank down upon the top step, crying hysterically. But Judith stood and watched until David was utterly lost in the gloom, her head held proudly and her eyes lighted with an exultant fire.

CHAPTER XVII

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ELLEN DAW SAYS FAREWELL

For a little while after Mary Reddin left her, Ellen Daw stood still, looking with eager eyes at the spot in the yellow green mist of the woods where Mary's slender figure had disappeared. At length, from looking down the path, she turned and placed both hands on the top rail of the fence - which had long since been softly enshrouded in the grey tenderness of moss and lichen growth - and standing thus her wistful eyes took the landscape of the still valley below her, and the greeny blue hills of Peter's Ridge opposite to witness, that at last out of all the world, and out of all her colourless procession of lonely, uncared-for days, Mary Reddin had come into her arms with a need for some of her heaped-up store of affection - nay, more had not only sought Ellen's hitherto unvalued affection, but had given her as well some of her own; bestowing it in the simple words, "You been mighty good ter me, an' I love yer!"

She loved her! Mary Reddin, the sweetest and prettiest thing in the Draft, loved Ellen Daw — Ellen Daw for whom nobody had seemed to care the least little snap of a finger. It was all to her a wonderful

and beautiful revelation, and with the revelation there leaped up within Ellen a very wildness of delighted love for the other girl.

Sometimes to herself, in her starved life, she had pretended that she was her own mother, friend, or lover, that in imagination at least she might throw around her neglected personality some of the different varieties of love that seemed to go wandering freely through the world, alighting so easily upon every one save herself. And now, with a quick turn of the hand, reality had given her the love of a friend—and of one, too, that Ellen had always extravagantly adored in secret. And Ellen's heart sprang to meet the gift with an overwhelming wave of tenderness.

Moreover, in this new and radiant gift all Ellen's imagined love for David melted away into nothingness. He had never been a real person to her—he was merely a frame upon which she had built her wistful dreams, and now in the face of reality the man of straw vanished—vanished so entirely and completely that Ellen never even comprehended that she had lost him. He had been created in her mind to fill her need for something to love, and as soon as there came a tangible outlet for that need the intangible shrivelled up and blew away like a cloud that had never been.

At length the long slant of the sun, and the gathering storm clouds, warned her that she must not dawdle there longer, hugging her new-found treasure, while her evening chores lay unattended at home; and with a last full sigh of happiness she took her hands lingeringly

from the fend and, climbing over it, started briskly on her homeward way.

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Once started she walked quickly, for she should have been at home long since. Indeed she had left her aunt's almost directly after dinner with the intention of getting home early, for there was always plenty of work to call her, and also that afternoon she had had a more than usually shrinking desire to get away from people's eyes, and be alone in the mountains once more. She had started homeward by way of the road, but the path that ran away into the hills past the Hull graveyard had lured her from the hot dustiness of the main track, and thus it chanced that sitting down to rest a few moments a little back among the undergrowth and wild azaleas she had been a witness to the scene between Mary and David.

As she went on her way now, the knowledge of her new possession kept pace with her and seemed to touch all life with a radiant inspiration — putting the elasticity of happiness into her whole being, and her mind went eagerly in quest of something that she could do for Mary to save her from the coming disaster — for with Ellen to love was to do.

Ellen Daw had not lived a normal life, and its unnatural lack of affection and companionship had warped her nature and made her different from most young women, and thus, when at last some little offer of friendship came to her, she returned it with an extravagant, almost an erratic, wealth of love.

It did not occur to her that Mary was nearly as old

as herself, and that she had certainly many more protectors than she had, for when Mary came into her arms she had seemed to Ellen like a little bewildered child, appealing especially to her for protection; and Ellen answered the appeal with an aching desire to be the one to shelter and defend her. But how was she to do it?—If she could only think of some way. Suddenly, as her mind groped thus for a golden solution to Mary's unhappiness, a suggestion sprang all at once into her mind and took quick shape as a possibility. Ellen stood still in the middle of the road, her heart leaping in great alarmed bounds, and her face blanching as the idea opened out before her like a flash.

At first it was only a horrifying thought, but as she walked on again, slowly it turned itself over in her mind, showing each side with a terrible insistent allurement; and Ellen, fostering it at first only in a sort of terrorized fascination, found presently that it gripped her more and more with a clutch from which she seemed powerless to escape. Yet appalling as the idea was, did she honestly desire to escape from it? What she desired more than anything else in the whole universe at that moment was to serve Mary Reddin, who with her sweet touch had pushed back a little the heavy doors of her loneliness; and the carrying out of this suggestion would serve her — would deliver her from the approaching ruin of her love.

Ellen let her mind pause in fatal speculation before it, and presently, thinking of her own unimportant and unloved existence, as compared to Mary, beloved and

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needed by so many, she whispered half out loud, "Hit don't matter erbout me — I ain't really nothin' ter nobody"; and with the words, the idea that had come at first merely as a vague possibility congealed suddenly into a definite purpose, and with a look of white finality on her face. Ellen began to walk very quickly, almost, indeed, to run, up the steep road of the mountain.

When she reached home she found Silas Daw impatiently and angrily awaiting her return, that he might be released from looking after Mrs. Daw, to hobble over to a near-by neighbour's for a Sunday chat; for the warm weather had lately eased his rheumatism sufficiently to enable him to get about a little with his two sticks, but not enough for him to feel that he could take part in any of the farm work.

Ellen gave no answer to his storm of querulous abuse, and watched him depart presently with keen satisfaction; for it suited well with her purpose that he should be absent.

She had run a good part of the way home, and though she was breathless, time had been saved, and there was yet a good stretch of daylight before her—even allowing for the brewing thunder-storm which would bring the darkness down earlier than usual.

She found her adopted mother sitting stupidly in the back doorway watching the meanderings of an old hen and brood of chickens. At the girl's approach she raised her blank face and stared foolishly. Ellen looked down at her. Used as she was to the emptiness of the face, it came over her now, in her aliveness to

all emotion, with a fresh shock of revelation, as though she saw it for the first time. Yet in the very shock she put the feeling from her, and stooping quickly kissed her mother with a keener pity than ever before. Then tossing off her sunbonnet she went swiftly into the kitchen, and lighting the fire set about her evening tasks with feverish haste.

She brought fresh water, filled the kettle and set it on to boil; made the usual soda biscuits and set them to rise; sliced the bacon ready to fry later, and then catching up her milk pail turned with the same eagerness to her out-of-door work. Yet though she worked so quickly, everything she did was done with a strange precision and careful finish, as though she were doing it all for the last time, and in so doing dwelt upon it with a fondness which long familiarity, and continual repetition, had thrown around it.

Out of doors it was the same way. When she milked the two cows she felt a close affection for them, and when she fed the old mare she even put her arms about her neck and laid her cheek against her mane.

"You an' me's seen some pretty tough times together, ain't we?" she whispered, "an' do' know but what you've had er harder time'n I hev — but maybe horses don't keer like folks do. But I keer —" she cried with quick sympathy, "cause you've allers hed sech er hard scuffle. You an' me's allers been sorter erlike, an' I keer, I do keer," she said again, and tightened her arms about the mare's neck. "I hope Pappy won't be mean ter yer," she added wistfully. "But any-

how, et he is, yer right ole an' yer won't hev ter stan' hit so very long."

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Every step she took about the stable yard was attended by a hurrying, anxious flock of heterogeneous poultry, and when at length she emerged with the pan of chicken feed, the whole multitude swooped toward her on flying wings. Turkeys with long swinging gait and cruel eyes, ducks with cheerful black eyes and widely expansive countenances, and hasty fat waddles assisted by outspread wings; a stray goose or two, and one lonely grey guinea, besides all the assembly of hens, pullets, roosters, and little chicks, the latter of varying ages numbered by weeks; all came to her half flying, half running - a soft wave of outspread wings. Some flew upon the rim of the pan, snatching a few eager pecks before bei- 7 sent fluttering to the ground; some, more adventurou.., flew on to her shoulder, and leaning over with cautious balan ing reached outstretched necks toward the pan, only to end by over-toppling themselves and going squawking to the ground, panic-stricken at their own venturesomeness; and all about her feet they were so thick that the girl could scarcely move without trampling upon them.

She knew them all so well! Every one of them individually, as she had known their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers before them. Just a hungry, selfish, squabbling horde, intent only on their own welfare, and yet — she cared for them — in spite of all she cared for them; for they were all part of the life that she was leaving, and truly, now that she

came to the wrenching away from it, there was infinitely more in her shut-away existence on the mountain-top than she had ever dreamed she cared for.

Flipping the last damp crumbs of the corn-meal dough from her fingers, she went slowly toward the house, the chickens still pursuing her, and she herself casting more than one backward glance at the landscape that she knew so well. Mountains piled and tumbled upon one another, little half-hid valleys lying in their arms; and mellowed farm lands in the distance, cut across by the silver flash of the Drupe River. In the doorway she paused and cast one long look at it all; and there was not a littlest valley, nor haziest distant stretch of farm land, nor shimmer of the river, nor least little rounded knob of mountain peak, with which she was not achingly familiar.

How many, many times had she stood as she stood now in that doorway when life was lonely and hard and bitter, and looking over at the mountains had gained quiet and fortitude from their large stillness. And now what else would she ever find to take their place?

Ellen turned at length in doors with a certain feeling of resentment that on this last evening there should have been no painting of the sky in glorious sunset colours as a remembrance, but that the sun should have dropped instead into the colourless bank of sullen storm clouds.

Indoors she finished getting supper, and laid the table with care. Her father had not yet returned, but it was nearly time for him, and she must hurry. She

pushed the coffee and crackling bacon to the back of the stove, and opened the oven door that the biscuits might keep hot without burning, and then pausing in the middle of the poorly furnished little kitchen she stood for a time taking in all its well-known details. The dour familiarity of the room seemed all at once to take on personality, and creeping toward her, silently, intangibly, to wrap long-accustomed arms about her, holding her in a curious wistful grip; as though all the inanimate objects with a sudden life, born of long association, cried to her that because for so long they had struggled together in a hard existence she could not leave them now.

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And the keenest pathos of it all was, that nature, inanimate objects, and indifferent animals were all, now that it came to parting, that Ellen Daw's whole life had brought to her from which to take leave.

For a little while she stood thus in the centre of the kitchen, then with a whimsical impulse she moved a step or two until she trod upon a rickety old board that creaked with her weight. Its protesting cry was a long-heard voice which for years had answered at intervals to the girl's hurrying feet as she went to and fro across the kitchen; and Ellen chose now to wake its complaint once more, because it was part of the accustomed whole, which, now that she was breaking away from it, all tugged so suddenly and so strangely at her heart.

She stood in her place on the old board, and as she did so tears began to burn slowly into her eyes.

"I—I dunno why I keer ter leave yer all so much," she faltered, putting her unsteady hands up to her face. "I've jest hated it all lots of times. Hated ther lonesomeness an' ther hard work an' everything, an' now, seems like I must er keered fer hit after all."

She stretched out her arms to the room, and, with the action, again the closeness of long familiarity rushed upon her achingly.

For a moment longer she stood, then dropping her arms quickly she turned and went resolutely into the main room.

Her mother still sat in the same blank attitude in the doorway, only now that the chickens were gone she played childishly with her fingers.

Ellen went past her, and going to the high chimneypiece stood upon tiptoes and reached one hand up, groping along the shelf. In a moment her fingers struck the thing for which she sought, and when she drew her hand down again she held in it Silas Daw's pistol. Searching hastily in an old cigar box she found the cartridges, and with trembling fingers slipped a load into place. With the snapping to of the barrel, the sudden full revelation of what she meant to do rushed upon her, and with a sick repulsion she flung the pistol upon the table, and springing back a pace or two stood looking at it with staring frightened eyes of fascination, as though she looked at a snake.

For a moment she gazed at it, facing all that it meant, and slowly she began to be overwhelmed by a desolate bewildered fright, a terror of her very self

and of her intention. She had broken from all her accustomed anchors, and faced a thing that was appalling.

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Oh! what was she planning to do? And why was there never any one by to give her aid or counsel when she needed it?

An overpowering desire for human touch and comfort came upon her — something, some one, to save her from her or a mad self. Wildly, in the extremity of her need, he looked toward her mother. The woman's eyes answered hers with their perpetual blankness, but empty as they were, still they were human, and with a frightened cry Ellen fled across the room, and buried her face against her shoulder — "Mammy, Mammy!" she cried, clinging to her — and it seemed as though the sharpness of her necessity must wake some response in the other's dead personality.

"Mammy, Mammy," she sobbed again, cowering closer against her. A light stirred in the expression-less face and some old far-away memory of the days before her fall, and before her little babies had slipped away, seemed to come faintly back to the old woman, and as though Ellen were a tiny child she put her arms about her and soothed her with murmuring baby talk.

"What is hit, honey; what is hit — can't hit tell hit's

Mammy?"

Ellen drew herself up in swift surprise and searched the withered face. Was there a gleam of returning reason there? But even while she gazed eagerly, the

momentary maternal expression died away, swallowed by the old vacant look, and pushing the girl from her the old woman clapped her hands together and broke into the fragment of a foolish song, her body swaying with the tune and her eyes lit with empty merriment.

Ellen sprang to her feet and turned again to the table. For a little space longer she stood wavering before the pistol, then with a sudden swoop she caught it up and fled desperately out of the house.

She ran with bent head, scudding along like a pursued animal, past the stable and along the path out to the main road, which, running up from the Jumping Creek Draft, dips over the mountain here, and going down to the free bridge crosses Drupe River there and runs away to the farms beyond.

Ellen checked her rapid pace when she came into the road, and drew herself down to a walk, for she needed time to think and to plan.

The daylight was almost gone and the murky thunderclouds made the sky very black in the pause between daylight and dark. The strength of the storm seemed gathering itself for a terrific climax in deeper and deeper drawn breaths. Occasionally a gust of wind went by, only to leave the stillness more still and oppressively expectant than ever.

Ellen had gone only a little distance when she became aware of two of the lumber men from Whitcomb's mill approaching her swiftly out of the gloom.

With a hasty movement she hid the pistol under her apron and stood waiting, and when the men came up

to her, her overwrought manner was gone, and she was just the shrinking, reserved girl that they were accustomed to meeting occasionally on the road.

"Kin you all tell me where I kin find Kip Ryerson?" she inquired, after the customary "good evening" had passed between them. "I — I got er message fer him!"

"Then you better look sharp an' giv' hit ter him ternight fer termorrer mornin' won't find him in these parts," one of the men laughed.

"Where is he?" she persisted.

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"He's in camp, right this minute — er he was when we come erway, but he's ergittin' his kit tergether ter light out. He laid up in ther woods back er camp all ther evenin' thinkin' that Cree feller'd be after him, but some way he didn't come, an' Kip he crep' inter camp jest er little while ergo an' tole ther boss he was goin' ter quit — an' I don't reckon even this storm'll keep him from leavin', he's scared up so bad."

"Which way will he go?" Ellen demanded.

"He ain't said; but he's most sure ter go erlong this erway, an' make down fer ther free bridge, fer he certainly ain't goin' back into ther Draft. Ef yer jest wait here er little spell you'll be most sure ter see him d'rectly, fer I reckon he mus' er got started by now."

A sharp thunder-clap cut his words off.

"But ef yer message ain't mighty important," he added as the thunder rolled away; "you better let hit go, an' shoot fer home; fer its comin' one er ther biggest storms I ever seed, an' that's sayin' er right smart";

and as though in confirmation of his words a high gust of wind and driven spatter of rain-drops struck them.

"Come on!" he cried to his companion, "er we'll not make hit ter kiver 'fore she busts." And clapping their hats tightly on their heads, they set off running up the road, their thick boots clumping heavily over the stones. Almost immediately the darkness snatched them from Ellen's sight, but for some time she could still hear their running feet, until the sound was lost in another thunder crash and scud of wind and rain.

Overhead the wind hissed through the tossed branches, and only by putting her hand against the trunk of a tree could Ellen herself stand against the fury of it. Through the darkness the lightning winked incessantly, like the opening and shutting of a great eye, and in sharp cracks the thunder followed close in its wake. In the distance the main body of oncoming rain roared with the full sound of a cataract, coming nearer and nearer in blown sheets.

Ellen cowered against a tree for shelter and support, and waited, her throat tight with nervous excitement, and waves of trembling surged over her every now and again. But her fear was not the fear of the storm, it was the agonizing terror of herself, and of the thing she meant to do.

Blown through and through by the wind, and drenched to the skin, she sank down to a sitting posture, and bending forward clasped her arms about her knees, sheltering with her body the pistol, which lay a dead weight in her lap. Sitting thus in the riotous grip of

the storm and of her own emotions, she listened with drawn breath for the sound of approaching footsteps. And at last in a moment's lull of the wind and storm she heard them; heavy footsteps, stumbling and groping over the rough way, and once a curse went with them.

Very slowly and very quietly, like a stealthy winddriven shadow, Ellen Daw rose to her feet; very cautiously, with a tiny unheard click, she cocked the pistol.

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Except when an occasional blue flame of lightning drank up the darkness, all her senses were merged in that of listening, and she stood with ears keen for every sound. Suddenly a flash lit the whole road in dazzling brilliance, and in the moment of its intensity Ellen saw a man's figure still a little distance away coming up the uneven track toward her. Then the soft lid of darkness shut down once more, and the girl drew a faint quivering breath, and again set herself to wait and to listen for the footsteps, through the uproar of the storm the violence of which increased every moment. Stumbling among the loose stones the man came on. He was opposite her on the road now, but all was still dark. Silently she extended her arm, finger on trigger, ready for the next instant of light. She heard him utter a protesting complaint over the obscurity of the way, and his footsteps went on a little further. Then it came - an intense vividly illuminating flash. In the outspread wings of light Ellen saw the man held sharply up to view, flashed upon, and enveloped in the brilliance as though he were the

only thing to see in all the world. His back was toward her, and at that she fired, and on the instant the lightning disappeared into darkness.

She heard the man utter a startled cry, but it was one of surprise, not pain, and she knew that she had missed; then the sharp crackling of the thunder leaped out enguling all in its heavy voice; and as it died away, the lightning flash, the report of the pistol, the man's cry and the grey roll of the thunder seemed all fleeing away into the darkness and out into space, to quiver freever down the ages upon each other's horrified footsteps.

As the thunder died Ellen heard a crashing and scattering of stones and knew that the man was plunging toward her furiously in the cark.

She had fired her shot and missed, and with the action all power had gone out of her. Like a limp and dead winter vine she clung to the tree trunk, unable to move, though she knew the man rushed upon her, beside himself with anger, and that the next breath of lightning would deliver her into his hands.

She was not dead to the fear of it all, yet she could not move, even to steal around the tree and place its trunk between herself and the groping eager vengeance that the dark held. He was very close now, and she could hear his quick breaths. She leaned against the tree all but unconscious with terror and dread of the lightning.

The lightning held off; yet feeling along with outstretched arms one of the man's groping hands brushed against her shoulder.

The sudden touch, the nearness of him, and the black intensity of it all, tore away Ellen's numbed silence, and on the instant that he touched her she screamed piercir.gly and sprang away.

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With a plunge he was upon her, flinging furious gripping arms about her waist. Again and again she screamed in an ecstasy of mad terror; and as though in answer to her cries, the lightning opened wide sudden eyes of horror upon the scene, and for an instant held the man and girl in the white hollow of its light.

With struggling panic-stricken strength Ellen tried to tear herself free; and as her assailant held her in his raging grasp he lifted his face, and all at once she saw that it was the face of Adrian Blair and on the instant he recognized her.

"Ellen Daw!" he screamed, mad with excitement; and reeled aside to let the fury of his strength pass her. Ellen fell away out of his relaxed arms an unconscious heap, and the black darkness shut down upon them.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE REASON FOR THE HOUSE

WHEN Ellen Daw opened her eyes once more to renewed consciousness, it was to find herself lying upon the hay heaped in one corner of the little sloping shed backed against Silas Daw's dilapidated stable. The lantern that she usually kept there, in case her chores at the barn detained her after dark, was lighted now and swung from its peg in the wall, its rays sending a faint illumination over near-by objects, and creeping away into the shadowy corners glimmered almost to obscurity in their blackness.

Outside the wind still went by in shrill gusts; the rain trampled upon the roof, and every now and again pallid blue lightning stooped suddenly out of the black wilderness of the sky and looked in at the shed's open sides.

Evidently Adrian Blair had brought her there after she lost consciousness, for he was standing over her knee deep in the hay, his face excited and very angry.

"What do yer mean by shootin' at me outer ther dark like that?" he demanded furiously as their eyes met.

Ellen put her hands to her temples and looked about her in wild bewilderment; than all at once, pressing

her face deep into the hay, she broke into a storm of low desolate sobs.

At first her tears came only from the awfulness and terror of the last few hours; but gradually as she wept the vividness of the present relaxed a little, and one after another all the lonely miseries of her past rose up before her, demanding their full measure of tears, which always she had denied them. The desolation of her whole life; her unhappy neglected childhood; the bitter impossibility of the work laid upon her; the poverty and shabbiness staring at her always with forlorn eyes; her own hard shyness, that came so fatally between herself and any show of friendliness; Mary's tragedy; and lastly again the horror of herself, and of the thing she had tried to do; all these heartaches strung themselves into a rosary of grief, and to each she gave a portion of her bitter tears. For the misery of the past she wept; for the awful present, and for the barren stretches of the dead future which opened before her.

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Adrian stood looking down at her shaken figure, and presently a little of the anger began to die from his usually gay face, which was never meant for any long holding of wrath.

Leaning down at length he put his hand upon her shoulder:

"What did yer shoot at me like that fer?" he persisted shaking her a little.

At his touch Ellen struggled again to a sitting posture. Her sobs checked themselves, and pushing her

hair back from her forehead she looked at him for a moment in dazed silence.

She was forcing herself out of her confusion of accumulated suffering and overwrought excitement, and trying to place Adrian and bring her mind to take hold upon his question.

In the lantern light her eyes shone through their mist of tears with a flame of mysterious unhappiness, as though they had looked into the unknown waste places of grief.

Her hair lay heavy and very black upon her brow, and her whole appearance was unusual and different from anything Adrian had ever known. And as always when her real emotions were touched, her true self awoke suddenly and sweeping away the barrier of her shyness took swift and rightful possession of her personality.

"I thought you was Kip Ryerson," she said at length, answering his question.

"Kip Ryerson!" he cried in amazement. "What's Kip done ter you?" he demanded quickly.

"He ain't done nothin'," she answered, her voice far-away and lifeless.

"Ain't done nothin'! An' yit you tried ter shoot him out er ther dark!" he cried incredulously. Suddenly an idea rose before him, and again anger leaped into his eyes.

"I know why yer done hit," he cried, "yer done hit cause yer love David Cree!"

Ellen looked at his flushed face steadily for a moment

before she answered. She was not gry as she had been the other times when he had acc 'her of caring for David. Then her anger had been kindled sharply by mortification, for he had laid a scornful hand upon what she believed to be the truth; but her feelings had travelled so far from that old imagined emotion that his facing her with it now seemed almost preposterous; and too impossible an idea even to humiliate her.

"No," she returned finally, "no, I don't keer fer him." She spoke so quietly, and with such unmoved strength of conviction, that Adrian knew beyond a doubt that she spoke the truth.

"Then what in ther name er sense did yer do hit fer?" he questioned, dumbfounded.

"I did hit 'cause I keer erbout Mary Reddin," she answered simply.

Adrian gave vent to a long whistle of astonishment; and Ellen knew that her reply had brought his imagination to an incredible standstill, as though a blank wall rose up before him, and suddenly a desire to make him understand seized her.

"Set down here fer er little bit," she said laying her hand upon the hay at her side, "an' I'll tell yer how hit all was."

Adrian hesitated a moment, but finally dropped down beside her, awaiting her explanation in silent mystification.

Ellen clasped her hands about her knees and began, her expression aloof, and her eyes looking out into the soft murk of darkness, as though there on the curtain

of the night she saw the events of the afternoon thrown magic-lantern like.

"I was comin' home from A'nt Mary's," she said with simple directness, "an' hit was so awful warm by ther road that when I come ter ther little path goin' through ther woods by ther Hull gravevard. I turned erlong hit; an' when I come ter ther place where hit runs over ther fence an' down ergin ter ther road. I was so hot I jest set down on er log back er little piece. in ther woods, ter rest an' cool off er spell. An' while I was er settin' there Dave Cree an' Mary Reddin come erlong, but they didn't see me fer I was sorter hid by ther bresh an' wild honevsuckles. Mary was walkin' holdin' on ter Dave's hand, an' jest lookin' up into his face every little bit, so scared an' so pitiful, like she thought every second he was goin' ter slip erway from her, an' Dave he looked like he was way off ter hisself in some lost place. An' when they come ter ther fence, Dave jest turned round an' said 'Good-by' - speakin' right quiet, an' when he said hit I knowed all in er minute what he was goin' ter do. An' Mary -" Ellen faltered a moment, and when she went on her voice had taken on new shades of tenderness. Mary," she continued, "jest went down on her knees an' begged him not ter go, an' done everything she knowed ter keep him; but hit didn't do no good, fer in ther end he climbed over ther fence an' went on down ther hill. An' Mary stood an' watched him fer er little spell, like she jest couldn't take hit in that he'd left her, an' then all of a sudden, when she knowed hit

was really so, she put her head down against ther fence an' cried like she'd cry her heart out — fer she'd tole David ef he did anything ter Kip he shouldn't never hev her, an' I know she ment hit."

Ellen paused as she had paused often during her narrative, looking out into the darkness as though the scene flashed out before her and she waited a moment

looking at it before going on again.

"An', an' then after Dave had gone," she resumed, "I come out from where I'd been settin', an' when Mary seed me she jest come inter my arms like er little hurt child what didn't know hits way. An' then after er little bit she went on home, but first she put her arms round my neck an' said she loved me."

Ellen got slowly to her feet, clinching her young toilworn hands hard together, and when she spoke it was in a low voice all to herself, as though Adrian Blair

were forgotten.

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"She was ther only livin' soul on God's earth ever said she loved me," she said softly. "I've lived all my life," she went on after a little, with bitterness in her tone—"I've lived all my life jest natu'ally hungry an' thirsty fer somebody ter say they keered whether I lived in ther world er got out er hit; an' ther ain't never been one soul ter say hit till she did. I wouldn't er keered who hit was—er ole woman er a ole man—any po' pitiful thing nobody didn't hev no use for would er been better'n nothin', an' good ernough fer me, so long es they keered fer me. But ther jest ain't never been nobody. Not one single living soul. I've

loved lots er folks in my heart, an' kinder tried ter fool myself by playin' like they keered fer me — but I allers knowed well enough they never did — they didn't even want my love, let erlone givin' me any er their'n."

She paused, her face flushed and the tears gathering again slowly in her eyes.

"Lots an' lots er times," she went on, "I've fed stray dogs that come erlong an' petted 'em, an' took home little half-starved cats, folks hed lef' erlong ther read, 'cause hit allers seemed ter me they was jest what I'd er been ef I'd er been er dog or a cat—ther wouldn't er been nobody ter keer fer me neither, an' I'd er been flung out on ther road ter starve jest like they was. An' when I took 'em home, I allers wondered ef God keered ernough fer them ter send me erlong ter take 'em in and be good to 'em, why he didn't keer ernough fer me ter send somebody erlong ter love me. An' an' then," she faltered painfully; "I got er thinkin' that maybe even God didn't keer fer me - not even God - es ef ther was somethin' wrong an' cur'us erbout me, that jest rose up betwixt me an' any kind er love er happiness. An' then -" her eyes suddenly grew luminous, and her whole face lit up - "an' then," she cried triumphantly, "Mary Reddin, ther sweetest little thing an' ther prettiest little thing in ther whole Draft, she come inter my arms, an' said she loved me, an' when she said hit her face looked jest like one er these here little white spring flowers with ther rain on hit. She said she loved me," she repeated lingering

over the words. "She said she loved me, an' — an' God knows I would er died fer her."

She stood perfectly still, in silence, and though she made no gesture save the tight clinching of her tired hands, Adrian know that the whole foundations of her being were shaken.

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He watched her for a moment, and then put out his hand and just touched her shoulder softly.

"Po' little thing," he said. Ellen turned and looked at him, as though she came back from far away; and at his touch and look her face took on a swift surprise.

She sank down upon the hay once more, and drawing a deep breath stumbled on with her story.

"An' then on my way home, wilst I was thinkin' what I could do fer Mary, hit come ter me all at onct that ef I — ef I — killed Kip, hit would make hit all right fer her. An' I kep' thinkin' ter myself that hit didn't matter what happened ter me, 'cos I was jest nothin' ter nobody. An' so I — I fixed ter do hit — but oh!" she broke off suddenly, wild terror in her eyes. "Oh! I was skeered, I was skeered! Hit seemed so awful an' wicked." She shrank away, burying her face in her arms and shivering in long frightened tremors. In a moment she raised her face to his again, looking at him with dark beseeching eyes.

"I didn't do hit, did I?" she cried distractedly. "Oh! say I didn't do hit"; she begged. "Fer oh! I'm skeered — I'm skeered er myself!"

For a moment the strain and the terror of it had all but tossed her into insanity. Looking at her distraught

face, Adrian realized this with the quick insight which underlay all his apparent gay indifference — and knew that he must act, and act quickly. Sinking down beside her he took her cold hands in his.

"You po' little thing — po' little thing," he said soothingly.

"Did I do hit?" Did I do hit? she breathed, her fear-lit eyes imploring him.

"No, yer didn't do hit — er 'course yer didn't," he answered. "God wouldn't er let yer do hit. He wouldn't er let er po' little lonely thing fling herself erway like that."

His strong hands quieted her with a gentle tenderness, and his voice was very kind.

"Yer've lived so long erway from folks up here, that yer got ter thinkin' all sorts er cur'us things; but even ef yer didn't b'lieve hit I reckon God was erkeerin' fer yer all ther time."

Suddenly he put out his arm and drew her strongly to him. "An' I was erkeerin' too," he said softly.

But his gesture startled her and she drew away with quick fear.

"Don't be skeered — don't be skeered er me, honey," he murmured, and drew her back to him, pressing her head down against the hollow of his shoulder.

For a moment Ellen struggled against him, but he held her tenderly, reassuringly, and at length she lay still, for she was utterly weary and half beside herself with fright, and in her exhausted bewilderment she

only knew that it was good for once to be held in the shelter of a strength greater than her own.

Outside the storm went on tumultuously, the rain beating upon the roof, and the lightning showing in occasional flares; but inside for a long time there was silence.

At length, however, looking down at her dark face, beautiful and pathetic in its weary loneliness, a tender whimsical smile began to play about Adrian Blair's mouth.

"Who'd yer say hit was keered fer yer?" he said at last, in scarcely more than a whisper.

Low as the words were they nevertheless broke the frozen spell of Ellen's bewilderment, and the confused mist of her mind cleared to a sudden realization of the present; and with the colour sweeping over her face in hot waves she struggled away from his arms, looking at him again with frightened eyes.

But Adrian persisted in the question.

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"Who did yer say keered fer yer?" he said.

"Mary Reddin said she did," Ellen answered wonderingly, and made a motion to rise to her feet.

But Adrian with a laugh drew her suddenly back into his arms.

"Who did yer say?" he repeated.

And "Mary Reddin," Ellen faltered again, though her voice shook and her eyes were wide with mingled terror and surprise.

At her words Adrian stooped quickly and kissed her full upon the lips.

"Who? Who?" he cried again.

And Ellen's heart leaped into her throat with a sudden astonished bound, and she was silent.

Adrian laughed again, a low ripple of triumph.

"Mary Reddin! Mary Reddin!" he cried scornfully. "I'm ergoin' ter tell yer now who loves yer sure 'nough."

Ellen's eyes lighted with a brilliant astonishment, and again Adrian kissed her.

"I allers knowed yer was erlive," he said tenderly, "but I never knowed jest what was ther word ter wake yer up with. How long," he broke off, "der yer reckon I've loved yer?"

Ellen shook her head, her eyes still incredulous.

"I never knowed yer loved me at all," she answered, for she thought he played with her, and again she tried in vain to draw herself away from him.

"I've loved yer," Adrian went on, "ever since that time I was tellin' yer erbout this mawnin' when ther dogs got ter fightin' in ther schoolhouse, an' you was ther only thing in petticoats thet wa'n't skeered. I knowed then thet yer hed ther stuff in yer thet I wanted, an' I've knowed hit right erlong ever since. An' er heap er times I was watchin' out fer yer when yer never guessed hit. Why—" he laughed suddenly—"ther worst fight I most ever hed at school was with Len Cooper 'cause his sister laffed at yer fer comin' barefoot ter school after all ther other children hed put on their shoes. Len was er right smart size bigger'n me, an' I hed er terrible scuffle fer hit, but in ther

end I got him licked good an' plenty — but he do' know ter this day why hit was I jumped him that time," he concluded chuckling.

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Ellen's eyes still dwelt upon his face in a great surprise.

"An' then do yer recollect how ther us'ent ter be no foot log over that there little crick at ther foot er ther mountain? You hed ter cross hit every day comin' ter school, an' one day I heered ther teacher givin' hit ter yer, because you was all wet, an' yer said ther stones at ther crossin' was so slick that you slipped offen one er them an' fell inter ther water. The next day was Sat'dy, an' I went up right soon in ther mornin' an' fixed er foot log acrost ther crick there" - he laughed at a sudden thought; "I recollect I wrote on er little piece er paper an' put hit under one end er ther log where wouldn't nobody ever see hit — "Ain't nobody ter walk on this log but my sweetheart!" Reckon that paper's rotted erway long ergo, an' heaps er other folks hes walked over on that log, but they wouldn't none er them er got ther chanst ter, ef my sweetheart hadn't er slipped in there that time," he concluded, looking down at her with smiling eyes.

"But whyn't yer never tell me before?" she asked wonderingly, and even yet it had not truly come home to her.

"Well, really I do' know. I wanted ter allers—but some way I was jest natu'ally skeered ter. When I was er little feller I said I'd tell yer when I was growed; an' when that time come, I said I'd save up some

money first, an' then when I got ther money, I said I'd wait till I'd built yer ther finest house anywhere round here, an then I'd tell yer. But when ther house was done I was jest es skeered es ever, cause yer allers seemed so sorter froze up an cold. I did low ter tell yer that day I helped yer plant yer corn, but sted er tellin' yer I jest made yer mad erbout Dave. An' then this mornin' ergin when I was all sorter warmed up from fightin' I meant ter do hit, but yer got mad ergin erbout him, an' I commenced ter be 'fraid yer keered fer him sure 'nough. An' then I got mad with myself fer bein' so skeery an' I jest lowed I'd come up this evenin' an' tell yer no matter what happened - but I didn't guess what would happen sure 'nough," he laughed. "An' now, sweetheart, I've told yer," he finished; "an' yer needn't never say ergin nobody don't keer about yer er want yer love - fer I want hit - all of hit - more'n I want anything else in ther world."

He paused a moment searching her dark eyes.

"Have yer got any fer me, honey?" he asked softly. Ellen struggled away from him, and holding herself off at arm's length, looked long into his face with questioning eyes.

"Oh! is hit true," she cried at length painfully—
"is hit true that yer want me an' want my love?"

"Hit's true, honey," he answered earnestly; "hit's every word true. I want yer love — I want every bit yer got, fer all mine's yours."

And looking at him Ellen knew at last that it was

true, and as she went back to the shelter of his arms all the old wistful unhappy question of her face was lost in the glorious light of this undreamed of answer.

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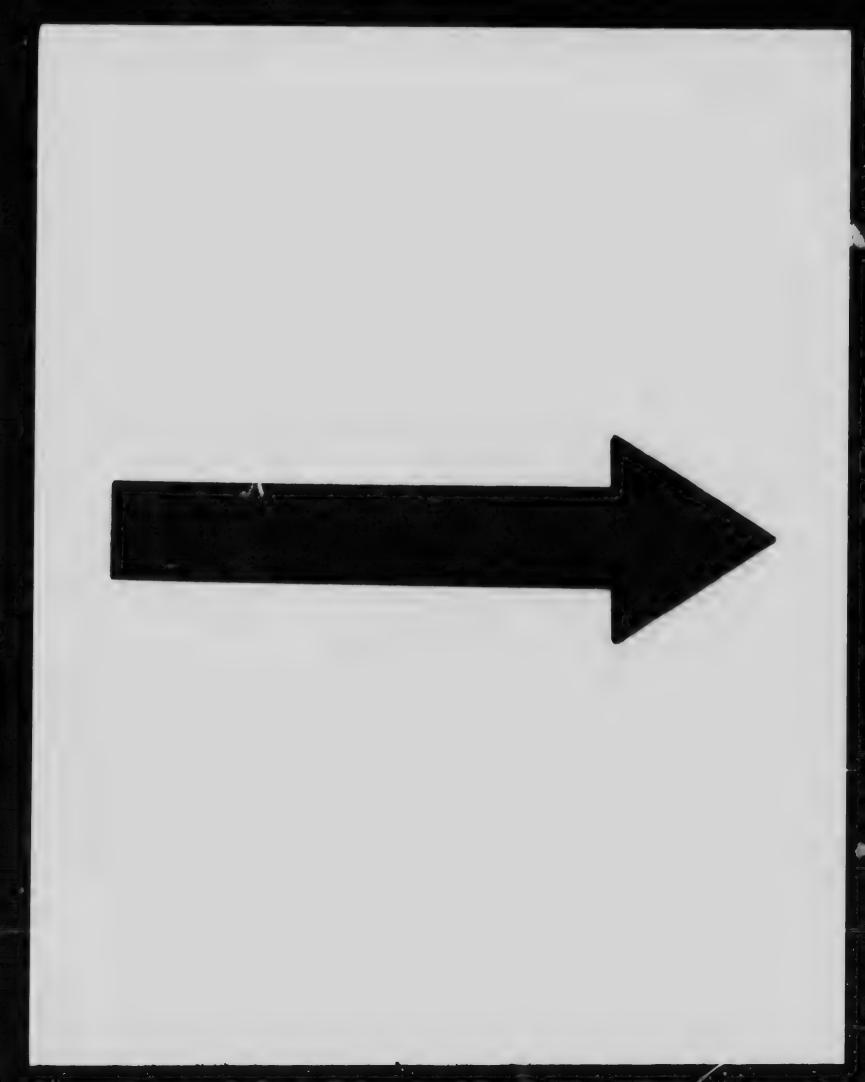
"An' yer house is all ready fer yer too, sweetheart," he whispered after a pause. "I've got ther garden all dug an' hit's jest waitin' fer you ter put in ther seeds."

"Ther house is mighty nice, but hit ain't ther house I keer about," she answered; and her glance swept over him with the stored intensity of the love that she had gathered out of all the lonely years of weary neglect.

"An' jest you mind this," Adrian went on master-fully; "don't yer go tryin' ter settle things fer Mary Reddin an' Dave; 'cause now yer belong ter me, so yer ain't got no right ter fling yerself erway like that, fer yer don't own yerself no mo'."

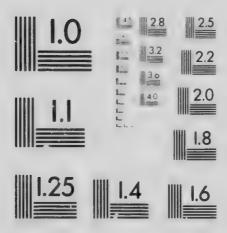
A little shy smile danced about Ellen's mouth, though her eyes were surprised to tears by the wonder of it all.

"I'm glad I don't," she answered; "for hit's — hit's nice ter belong ter somebody."



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

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CHAPTER XIX

THE PLAYERS

WHEN David Cree went past his mother and sisters and was gathered into the murk of that sombre evening, he walked with a resolute step, and a white determination of face. To all intents and purposes he was once more the passionate boy of twelve, with his promise fresh upon him, and the loss of his father poignantly new. The wave of his mother's fury had swept him back to his boyhood. Her terrible words, her voice, her gestures, had brought him face to face with the past. had washed his memory of the last ten years as though they had never been, and all the passion of that bygone time rushed back upon him in currents of fire. With the accumulation of her frenzied bitterness, she had suddenly lifted away the weight and obscurity of the deadening years, uncovering, as it were, the live rage of his childhood. The past was upon him, and the boy he had been and the man he was struck close hands in the fellowship of hate, and went forth together upon their path of revenge.

To any one else it would have been difficult walking, for the storm and the night approached in company

THE PLAYERS

on black wings; the objects seen faintly through the dust took on fantastic and uncanny shapes, and the wail of the wind seemed just the voice of the lost darkness made audible; but David knew the Jumping Creek Draft from end to end. All the smallest irregularities of the road were familiar landmarks to him, and the swing of his stride was almost as steady as though day and not night held the valley in its hand.

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Evenly, silently, revenge incarnate, he went up the main track of the Draft; past the little schoolhouse; past the huddle of farms just beyond it, where the dogs set up a furious barking at the sound of his footsteps, and where the lamps winking from the different scattered windows were evidence of a life which seemed to him very remote, and very far away from anything with which he was concerned or ever had been; past the knoll where Adrian Blair's empty house stood waiting Ellen Daw's dark presence, he went, and at last struck into the narrow roadway making up Drupe Mountain to the Daws' farm and to Aleck Whitcomb's lumber camp. In the desolation of that lonely path, where the mountains on either side went up like black ramparts, he took out his pistol and held it ready in his hand, for there was no telling to what the loneliness and obscurity might give sudden birth.

Here the road was more difficult to pick, and of necessity he went slowly, and was glad every time the lightning fled along the way before him on winged feet. Glad, too, of every crash of thunder, and every blown devil that the wind loosed. And once or twice

when the wind was very strong, and the lightning sharply forked, he stopped still in the path and laughed furiously, for he was on fire with the need of fierce, blinding action, and it was good to him that the storm should answer his mood; that the darkness should be shrickingly, flaringly rent asunder by the wind and lightning, and the stillness shivered by the crackling thunder; that all the elements should be torn into a riotous uproar, as he was torn with the dizzy swirl of his own anger.

At the top of the mountain where the road divides, the left fork leading down to the river by way of the Daws' farm, and the right-hand one running along the mountain to Whitcomb's lumber camp, David turned down the latter, and that short mile to the camp, because of the tantalizing nearness now of his revenge, seemed longer to his impatient feet than all the miles from the Draft added together.

But in spite of its infuriating distance, he was met at last by the sharp smell of sawdust, and saw in the darkness the dim shapes of the piled lumber, the mill shed, and the other few buildings of the camp.

At the door of the main shack Aleck Whitcomb himself faced him out of the lamp-lit interior in answer to his knock.

As he saw David's face in the outside gloom, which the rays from the faint kerosene lamp at his back seemed only to play across and not to pierce, Whitcomb started slightly.

"Reckon you come lookin' fer that feller who's been

THE PLAYERS

goin' by ther name of Jake Green, but who's really Kip Ryerson they tell me," he said.

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"That's what I am," David answered quietly, making no attempt at concealment. He was going to kill Ryerson, and all the world was welcome to a knowledge of his intentions. There was no caution in his vengeance. He had a sort of furious scorn of any attempt to save himself, and if it had been possible he would have liked to kill the man with all the Draft lined up as witnesses to the accomplishment of his oath, and to do it before them all with his bare hands.

Whitcomb laughed shortly at his reply. "Well, you'll hev ter look fer him somewheres else," he said. "He left these parts this mornin' 'fore dinner — I hear you giv' him er right good reason fer goin' at preachin'."

"Which way'd he go?" David demanded.

"Well, really he was in sech er hurry he didn't leave no address, but I know mighty well he didn't go down inter ther Draft," the other answered jocosely.

"Then he's gone over ther mountain, an' down ter ther river," David said restlessly, and turned to go.

"Yer'd better lay up here in camp till ther storm's over," Whitcomb urged him; but David shook his head, and went away again into the darkness, though already the rain was beginning heavily, and the roar of it upon the iron roofing of the mill shed was deafening.

Whitcomb turned back into the shack, shutting the door after him, though he did so with some difficulty against the full breath of the wind.

"Yer kin come on down ergin now," he said, raising his voice to almost a shout to make it audible above the storm. "He's gone."

From the loft above, at his words, two lank legs swung down on to the ladder, and then paused in hesitation.

"Come on," Whitcomb shouted again, and this time there was a savage ring in his voice.

The legs came down a rung and then another rung, and as they descended the body and then the face of Kip Ryerson came into view. The face was very pale.

"What in all H — did yer want ter ask him in for?" he demanded, a shake in his voice.

"Cause I pretty well guessed he wouldn't come; an' ef he had I lowed I could trust yer ter lay right close outer sight upstairs," the other returned. "An' now let me tell yer something, Jake Green, er Kip Ryerson, er whatever ver call verself - you'll clear outer this by ther very first crack er day er I'll know ther reason why. Hit won't pay yer ter hide 'round here no longer thinkin' I'm goin' ter keep Dave Cree offer yer. I've lied ernough erbout yer a'ready, an' ef yer think I'm ergoin' ter keep hit up ver powerfully mistaken. I done hit this time not out er any perticular regard fer ver, but jest because Dave's worked fer me, an' he's erbout the best hand in ther woods I ever seed; an' hands is too scarce a'ready fer me ter want ter run ther resk er havin' one er ther best ones I know sent ter ther penitentiary er maybe hung fer good. So yer'll jest erblige me by tryin' ter keep outer Dave Cree's way

THE PLAYERS

when yer light out in ther mornin'— jest ter erblige me, yer understan'," he concluded with a roar of scornful laughter.

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He was a powerful man and arrogant with the knowledge of his strength, and of his ability to manage other men, and he stood now with open contempt, regarding the other's weakly evil face, consumed as it was with fear and with furtive rage.

"Lord!" he went on with a fresh burst of laughter. "How yer ever got up ther spunk ter resk comin' back inter these parts, beats me. I reckon yer must er thought Alderson Cree's murder hadn't made no more impression on other folks than it had on you — Now don't trouble yerself ter say yer didn't do hit," he continued quickly, as Ryerson opened his mouth in blasphemous denial, "cause everybody knows yer did, an' you'll be powerful grateful ter me when Jedgement Day comes erlong that I kep' yer from one lie anyhow." He paused again, and again the contempt of his glance swept over the cowering figure before him. Again he laughed, and at the laugh and the hectoring gaze, hate, like a smothered flame, played stealthily in Ryerson's dropped eyes.

"Now mind what I say," Whitcomb went on, crossing over to the door; "daylight sees yer cleared outer here, er else ther next daylight mightn't see yer at all—understan'?" he said coolly, pausing one moment to drive home his words with the fixed scorn of his eyes. Then he jerked open the door and still laughing turned out into the lumber yard.

In just the second that his retreating back was presented to him, the smouldering hate of Ryerson's face blazed up, and he drew his pistol like a flash. But in that second fear spoke to him sharply, and though rage was strong, terror was stronger, and his pistol arm fell back harmless.

And Aleck Whitcomb, crossing to the kitchen where most of the men were at supper, never knew in his careless arrogance that the moment before he had walked upon the edge of the next world.

David groped his way back to the top of the mountain where the roads divide, and went a little way along the one leading to the river, but the full shock of the storm was upon him now, and the wind and rain and darkness were thick like a curtain, and as he struggled to make head against them the impossibility of finding his way safely down to the river in such darkness came home to him.

Even in broad daylight the path was an uncertain one, with innumerable confusing branches, and dangerous too, in places where it ran along the edge of a cliff, a misstep from which might send one to the bottom with a broken arm or leg, or very possibly a broken neck; and even in his passionate haste David knew it would be the wildest folly to attempt it now.

By the roadside a short distance further on stood a deserted cabin, and remembering it David decided to seek shelter there, and thither, with his anger fretted to a white heat at the delay, he at length groped his way, and entering this forlorn and decaying refuge,

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in the dryest corner he flung himself down to wait for a cessation of the storm and the lifting of the darkness. He was drenched to the skin, and the rain, coming as it did in the wake of such an exceedingly hot day, would have seemed, at any other time, chillingly cold, but David's whole being was on fire with his anger, and he lay in a fever of hot impatience, chafing savagely at the darkness which flung such soft infuriating arms across the path of his vengeance. But gradually as the night crept on, and the severity of the storm lulled to a delicate whispered melody of rain, which was infinitely soothing, and yet did not abate anything of the impossible darkness, his feelings began to lose a little of their violence, and then to settle to a strong quiet, and after this peace had been with him for a space, slowly, irresistibly, on silent feet his love came stealing back upon him, to fling her arms about him in his remembrance of Mary; to whisper to him with her voice, to kiss him with her lips; to look at him with her eyes. The feeling was illusive, intangible — almost terrifying, and with all his distracted soul David fought against it, for every thought and remembrance of Mary struck deadly blows at the power of his hate. Desperately he called back all that he had imagined of the carrying out of his revenge; the tingling thought of Rverson under his hands, which made him almost sick with a desire for its accomplishment - flinging this rekindling of his fury in the face of his love. And as hate looked at her with red eyes, love fled. But only a moment later to come stealing, stealing, maddeningly

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back, the instant hate relaxed her clutch ever so little. And once, in a sudden aching remembrance of Mary's agonized face, David leaped to his feet with a great spring, and seizing his pistol would have flung it through the doorway, far away from him, to whirl over and over in its flight, and then to lie still — lost in the dark wet woods. But even as he swung his arm up his promise fled back upon him in frightened surprise, and with an oath that came from the very bottom of his soul his hand dropped. Staggering like a drunken man he went back to the corner where he had lain. astonished at himself and appalled by the weakness that had almost made him forget. Once more he lay down, and once more the tides of conflict rent him back and forth; and always Marv's white face looked at him, and her voice cried to him, "Hit'll kill me Dave! Hit'll jest kill me!"

But far in the night, wet and uncomfortable though he was, and torn though he was by his emotions, nevertheless before the dawn broke he fell heavily, dreamlessly asleep — and so for a time the players, love and hate, cried off their game — perforce.

CHAPTER XX

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THE WORD FROM ALDERSON CREE

If the heavens had opened for Ellen Daw when Mary had given her her first kiss of affection, and left her standing by the rail fence on the brow of the steep ridge overlooking that part of the Draft, and in her joyful heart calling upon Peter's Ridge as a glad witness of her new-found happiness, Mary's state of mind, on the other hand, as she left Ellen and went slowly homeward was a very different one. The heavens of her world had indeed opened, but not to happiness. In the rift they had suddenly uncovered to her a thing that was appalling - beyond all her comprehensior. In spite of her very agony of loving effort, David had left her; had broken the bonds of love as easily as Samson had snapped "the seven green withes that had never been dried," and had set out on his feverish path of vengeance, swept along by hate, though all the time he knew — he knew — love stayed behind and stretched anguished arms to him. She had gathered herself for her supreme effort — never doubting her power, coupled as it was with love - had made it, and had failed utterly.

David's putting her from him, and going down the

path, had been to her a stunning, an utterly incomprehensible blow. For with her love was everything, was her universe — and that in David another emotion should have risen up suddenly stronger was to her unbelievable — for Mary was still very young, too young for any sustained feeling of hate, only for love. And now in the face of this new revelation her heart stood still within her, overwhelmed and dumbfounded.

She was frozen by the utter weary terror of it all; by the suddenness with which her happy paradise of the morning had been shattered, and by the thought of the awful thing which might even then be taking place. Moreover, she was physically and mentally exhausted by her supreme effort of pleading, and by the last strained hours of watching David and trying with a fearful intuition to anticipate his every impulse.

Her heart lay like a cold weight in her bosom, and her feet dragged heavily down the path, yet had she guessed that just across, on the other side of the valley, David lay upon his face in the green silence of the woods, while love and hate fought through him, her tired feet, forgetting all their weariness, would have fled along the way to him with incredible swiftness.

Brushing her hand across her forehead every now and again with a dazed gesture, and trailing the gay little sunbonnet indifferently after her by one string, Mary came slowly down from the woods and made her way home.

Her mother, dressed in her clean Sunday print, sat upon the porch alone, save for the baby in her lap, the

other small Reddins having scattered to the four winds of heaven. As Mary sank down upon the top step of the porch and put her head wearily back against one of the roof pillars her mother gave her a quick look.

"Where's Dave?" she said.

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"He's gone," Mary answered dully.

"Gone?" Mrs. Reddin cried. "Aw, Mary, you'd oughten ter er let him go — all mad like he is, I'm mighty 'fraid he'll git inter trouble with Kip!"

"Let him go!" cried the girl sharply; "how could I keep him from goin'? I — I got down on my knees ter him not ter go, but hit didn't do no good — how else could I er kep' him?" she questioned.

"Which way'd he go," her mother asked soothingly.

"He's gone home — he's gone home fer —" the girl faltered and broke off, her face growing slowly white.

"Never mind, honey, never mind," her mother cried tenderly. "Don't you take on; I wouldn't be er bit surprised ef Kip wa'n't way outer reach by now, an' your keepin' Dave so long with you'll giv' him er chanst ter git clean off," and she hugged the baby in her arms to show her sympathy and compassion for her older child.

Mary's face lit up pathetically.

"I did keep him er little spell, didn't I? He did keep er way from Kip er little while fer me, didn't he, Mammy?" she begged.

"Er course he did, honey, er course," her mother answered, bestowing more eager caresses on the baby.

"But, oh!" Mary cried, and pressed her hand to

her temple — "Oh! Mammy, I ought ter er kep' him altergether — there must er been somethin' I could er said to keep him — some way — ef I could er jest thought of hit! Oh! Mammy," she appealed to the older woman, "what was hit I oughter er said ter him?"

Mrs. Reddin's reply was drowned in a sudden burst of deep baying from old Turk, the hound, who had been lying to all appearances fast asleep in the damp delicious coolness of the lengthening grass of the yard, but who now aroused himself to apparent ferocity, as he perceived the approach of Johnny Snyder — Orin Snyder's fourth boy. Arrived at the yard gate this young gentleman paused discreetly.

"Why, howdy, Johnny! Come right in," Mrs.

Reddin called out hospitably.

"I'm 'fraid er ther dog," he cried back, still keeping the gate securely closed.

"Aw, he won't trouble yer. Turk you behave yerself now — go lie down, sir! There now — yer come right in, an' ef yer don't act like yer scared of him he won't do er thing ter yer."

"Well, yer keep er watch on him then," Johnny replied, opening the gate with extreme caution, and ready to slam it hastily shut at any further demonstration from the enemy, for he had an immense regard for the calves of his slim ten-year-old legs. Coming timorously up the yard path he paused at length at the porch steps, flicking at the long grass with a peeled switch which he carried, and keeping one eye still cocked on the hound.

"Ole An't Marthy Lamfire's took mighty sick," he said; "an' she lows she wants Mary ter come an' set up with her — Mammy sent me over ter say so."

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"Oh! I can't go!" Mary cried sharply, passing her hand over her face. "I can't go, kin I, Mammy?" she appealed.

"Maybe I kin go in yer place," her mother suggested.

"Is she took much worse than she hes been?" she asked, turning to Johnny.

"She says she don't want nobody but jest Mary," he answered, still flicking the grass indifferently, and still watching the dog. "Yes'm, she's mighty bad off. I don't look fer her ter git well er tall — they hes ter feed her altogether outer a teaspoon, an' yer know when folks gits that bad ther ain't much show fer 'em," he concluded, with the hardened philosophy of youth.

Mary rose to her feet with sudden changed determination.

"I'll go," she said. "I promised her I'd go ter her ef she was took sick. I might jest es well go," she went on, answering her mother's look of protest, "I ain't doin' no good here, an' I feel like I must do somethin'. An' anyhow I promised her'; and so saying she slipped into the house to change her Sunday frock.

"Well, ef yer aire goin' yer'd better hurry," her mother called after her. "Ther's er powerful big storm comin', an' I'm mighty 'fraid hit'll ketch yer 'fore yer git ter ther Mossy Holler."

Johnny Snyder squinted one knowing eye at the heavens.

"I don't look fer hit ter break much 'fore dark," he said with masculine reassurance; "hit's been ergrowlin' 'round jest this erway fer over er hour er more." His air was that patronizing one of tolerance which a man assumes to calm a woman's nervous fears.

Was it chance, or was it in answer to the thunder, that at this moment of masculine superiority old Turk, from his retired spot in the grass, should have opened one sleepy red eye, and whispered one faint growl to himself? Whichever it might be was not for Johnny Snyder to pause and inquire, and a twinkle of bare legs saw him outside the yard gate in a flash. From this haven he stopped to explain to Mrs. Reddin, mindful of her earlier advice.

"I'll jest step out here," he said elaborately, "fer fear ef I stayed in ther yard I might do somethin' ter make that ole dog think I was erfraid of him."

When Mary made her way up the dark little path of the Mossy Hollow which, seen now in the gathering shadows of evening, and in the black threat of the storm, was more than ever sombre and eerily desolate, and entered at length Martha Lamfire's forlornly small cabin, she found assembled there some half dozen of the matrons and old women of the Draft. They sat in an ominous whispering group about the bedside, their faces showing strangely white and solemn in the room's uncertain gloom.

Old Martha was lying under the gay patchwork quilt in a seeming stupor when Mary entered, but as the girl stepped across the creaking boards of the

floor and bent over the bed, she opened her eyes with startling brilliance.

All her days Martha Lamfire had lived with intense aliveness. All the monotony of the Mossy Hollow, the bare thought of which would have made many people shudder with depression, had never succeeded in crushing out the vivacity of her spirit. In all the little that life had brought her she had been strongly, keenly alive; in her love for Amabel, in her hate for Alderson Cree; and now, in the hour of her death, she was still the same indomitable personality, vividly alive, in spite of the fact that her eyes, as they opened, looked into Mary's face with the bright aloofness of delirium.

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"Ammy — Honey!" she cried; and a wave of surprise swept over the watching women, for there was not one among them who had ever heard just that note of broken tenderness in the old voice. Mary took the hard fever-burnt hand in hers and pressed it softly.

"Don't yer know me, An't Marthy?" she said. "It's Mary — Mary Reddin. I promised yer I'd come ef yer sent fer me."

The old woman looked at her a moment in perplexity, as though her bewildered brain groped for enlightenment in remote places.

"Mary Reddin — Mary Reddin," she murmured turning the name over; "Mary Reddin." Then suddenly light leaped into her eyes, and cleared them of their lost look.

"Mary Reddin - David Cree - Alderson Cree -

Amabel Lamfire," she cried quite loudly, and very quickly, as though her strayed senses fled breathlessly along the stepping-stones of the names and came home at last to that familiar treasured one which no amount of delirium could blot from her mind. There she paused, and for a little space she lay whispering the name.

"Amabel, Ammy, Amabel Lamfire," over and over, as a mother tries over her baby's name to take the strangeness from it. But all at once the sibilant tenderness of the whispering ceased, and she spoke out loud, a harsh surprise in her voice—

"Alderson Cree!" she cried. "O Lord! Alderson Cree!" The words came with a startled rush of astonishment. Then with the same quickness her mind swept her on, and all at once the little withered figure which scarcely wrinkled the bed clothes was shaken by gust after gust of low witch laughter — laughter which shook her all over yet scarcely altered the brilliant, strange look of her face. Once as she laughed Mary wondered as she caught the muttered words, "A-ha, Judy Leister."

Mary took both her hands in hers, and spoke with low insistence, for the laughter and brilliant face together were terrible.

"A'nt Marthy — A'nt Marthy," she said firmly; "Don't yer know me? I'm Mary Reddin — Mary Reddin," she repeated. "I've come ter set up with yer like I promised. Don't yer know me, A'nt Marthy?"

Gradually the old woman's scattered senses returned, and looking into the girl's face attentively she spoke slowly.

"Mary Reddin —" she said — and Mary saw that at last she knew her — "Mary Reddin, promise me yer'll stay by me till I die; promise me yer won't leave me — promise," she cried feverishly.

But Mary drew back little, "I do' know's I kin, A'nt Marthy — Dave may —" she faltered and broke off.

"Girl!" Martha cried with sudden fierce strength; "ef yer don't stay by me yer'll be sorry fer hit ter yer dyin' day — yes! ter yer dyin' day an' afterwards."

Mary shrank away from the awful face and from the passion of the voice, but as the eyes still threatened her, at length she gave her promise to stay, though she did it fearfully and reluctantly.

A whisper of argument and dissent arose now among the women, and the group began to disintegrate.

"Ef yer'll stay ternight, Mary, Mis' Cooper says she'll stay with yer an' watch, an' some of us'll be over soon in ther mornin'," Mrs. Snyder said, shaking out her ample figure and reaching for her sunbonnet.

"Ther doctor said ther wa'n't nothin' we could do fer A'nt Marthy an' ther rest of us hes ter go now, seein' hit's most dark, an' er powerful big storm comin'—an' anyhow I bet my baby's been cryin' fer me fer ther last hour er more. I'll take ther word ter your folks that yer won't be home ternight," she went on to

Mrs. Cooper; "an' I'll drop in myself ther very first thing in ther mornin'."

At the scrape of their chairs and the rustle of their skirts, old Martha shut her eyes determinately, and lay motionless and indifferent, though more than one woman bent over her with a forboding shake of the head, and a whispered, "Po' soul, po' old soul!" Then with low-spoken "Good-bys," and lingering glances, they emerged into the relief of the spring air, and turned toward their homes severally, and in little groups, gossiping over the condition of the old woman, the approaching storm, and the state of the crops, all with equal interest.

Mary, settling herself by the bedside in a chair vacated by one of the departed women, was conscious of a keen relief in their going away, for the continued low whisper of their remarks and the gravity of their pale faces had been nerve-racking in the extreme, and for a little while, in the silence and almost entire darkness of the cabin, she seemed to be gathered as it were into soft arms and to slip away a little from the vivid present of her own tragedy.

But presently Mrs. Cooper, with a fretful exclamation that "Hit was so dark yer couldn't see yer hand before yer face," rose, and groping about found matches, and lit the small glass hand lamp, which from its high perch on the mantel shelf sent a desolate light over the room, worse than actual darkness.

"An' I'm that hungry too," the woman complained, "I'm jest erbliged ter hev somethin' ter cat. I hadn't

got more'n two or three bites er dinner when here come Allie Snyder sayin' A'nt Marthy was took worse an' ter come there. Reckon ther mus' be some sort er cold victuals in that there ole press," she continued in her whining voice, which held always a grievance against the rest of the world.

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On heavy feet whose steps jarred the whole cabin she crossed over to an antiquated tin-studded cupboard, and pulling open the door with a fretful jerk explored within; presently bringing to light a plate of cold soda biscuits and a half-emptied jar of peach butter. Sighing, she let herself ponderously down into a chair by the bare wooden table, and began her meal - first, however, holding out the plate and jar to Mary as an invitation to partake also. The girl shook her head almost in disgust and turned away, fixing her eyes on the darkest corner of the room. In her overwrought and anxious state the mere thought of food was distasteful to her, and the relish with which the fat woman fell to was sickening. Besides, Mary knew, with quick intuition, that though Martha lav with closed eyes, apparently dropped again into stupor, she was in reality keenly and resentfully aware of the other woman's prving into her things, which no hand save her own had wandered among for so many years.

The old woman lay for a time rigidly still; then gradually her muscles relaxed and she fell at length into what appeared to be a light doze.

Mary sat on quietly in her chair, her wide eyes bent upon the darkness, and every nerve following David

in fearful imagination. By the table the fat woman continued her noisy meal, running the blade of the wooden-handled knife into the glass jar in an eager quest for the last little scrapings of the peach butter. The clock on the high mantel struck the hour with a vibrant tin-pan tone, followed by a sharp click, as though tiny hands applauded the performance as each stroke shimmered away into silence, and save for these sounds the room was very quiet, until, with a sudden blue sheet of flame and crack of thunder on top of it, the storm broke heavily over the hollow. At the crash Mary jumped in her chair, and Mrs. Cooper dropped her knife clatteringly down upon the emptied tin plate.

"Thunder allers did make me jest es nervous es a cat"; she said, rising hastily and going over to shut the door.

Old Martha had started broad awake and was staring about her with wild eyes. She drew herself feebly towards the edge of the bed, and made an effort to set her feet upon the floor.

"Hit's rainin'," she muttered. "Hit's rainin', an' Ammy'll git wet — I gotter go fetc! her in. Yes, honey, yes!" she cried; "Mammy's comin'!" and again she attempted to get out of bed. But Mary pressed her gently back.

"Lay still, lay still, A'nt Marthy,"she said soothingly. "Ammy's all right — you jest lay still."

For a moment the old woman looked at the girl in mysterious question, then she took up her words and

turned them over and over slowly — "Ammy's all right, Ammy's all right — she's all right"; and in spite of the monotony of delirium her voice held in it a wistful interrogation. Afterwards she fell into a long wandering babble of broken phrases and idle, foolish words, all strung together and interwoven with the repetition of the dead girl's name, which ran like a ray of light through all the entanglement of her bewildered brain. Now it was Ammy as a baby, and she crooned baby words to her; now a little girl at her play; now at work in her garden - and thus with her rambling thoughts the old woman groped her way back through the dim past - or was it the past with her? Was it not instead all an intense present? Certainly Mary heard her crv out sharply once - "Yes, honey, yes! Mammy's goin' ter tell - don't look that erway!" as though she spoke to someone at her side.

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Outside the roar of the wind and rain and crash of thunder made wild pandemonium in the narrow hollow. At every fresh clap Mary's heart leaped within her in frightened bounds, though usually she was healthily unafraid of thunder-storms; while Mrs. Cooper cowered frankly in her chair, burying her head in her arms at each streak of lightning.

"I allers did hate er lightnin' storm," she quavered; "an' shet erway up here in this terrible lonesome holler with that old crazy woman is ernough ter drive er person jest plum distracted."

In truth, caged by the steep sides of the hollow the force of the wind and crash of thunder were doubled

and seemed bounding back and forth in a wild endeavour to escape, and in their tumultuous fury the flimsy cabin rocked again.

Distracted with terror Mrs. Cooper began to pray out loud, in long whining ejaculations of complaint and terror; Mary also had to take fierce hold upon herself to keep from screaming. And through it all old Martha went on with broken phrases and babbled remembrances of Amabel.

Gradually, however, the fury of the storm swept on to further ravages beyond, leaving behind only a gentle steady summer rain.

Mrs. Cooper stretched herself in weary relief. "I declare I'm jest clean beat out with it all," she announced. "An' I b'lieve I'll jest take er little rest ther first part er ther night, an' then I'll take ther watchin' an' you kin git er good sleep. I wisht ter ther goodness ther was any chanct of my snatchin' er forty winks, but I'm that wrought up hit don't seem like I could sleep ergin fer er week — but I'll jest try ter rest er little spell anyhow."

She stretched her large frame expansively and thoroughly, and then not waiting for any reply from Mary she put her head down upon her arms on the hard table, and fell asleep almost instantly — a great lump of inanimate blue gingham.

Mary shifted her position stiffly in her chair, and settled to her long watch. The clock ticked with monotonous heavy beats, the fat woman's breath came in long deep snores, and Martha babbled on.

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At first Mary was pulsingly awake, and she felt as though at each breath of the sleeper her racked nerves would give away, and she would scream out that David Cree was killing Kip Ryerson, in hysterical protest to the indifference of the world.

But after a time, as the night dragged wearily on, and Martha's wanderings died again into a stupor, Mary, quieted by the tranquil freshness of the atmosphere after the storm, and by the delicious sharp smell of the thirsty earth, began to feel a certain lethargy and indifference creeping upon her, which was not sleep. Sitting thus in the little desolate room, her thoughts began to turn away from David and to dwell upon Amabel Lamfire — the report of whose extreme beauty had always had a fascination for her.

She thought of her living there her retired life in all her delicate radiance of youth and loveliness. What sort of an existence could hers have been, which indoors was bounded by the drearily dull confines of that small room, so sparsely furnished even to the Draft notions; and which out of doors was encompassed by the hollow's sombre walls, with only an occasional trip to the store, and to the schoolhouse for preaching and prayer-meeting, or perhaps a few visits to a neighbour's? What had she had in all her life to make up for the monotony of it? First she had had her mother's passionate love; then she had had her extreme beauty; and lastly she had loved Alderson Cree. Of these three seeming happinesses, the first and third, between them, had broken her

heart, and the second had done her more harm than good.

Mary sighed as she thought about it. Amabel Lamfire had loved Alderson Cree and it had broken her heart. Mary Reddin loved David Cree — and was her heart to be broken also? And with the thought Mary half echoed old Martha's bitter cry — "Oh! them Crees!"

Again turning back to Amabel she let her eyes wander idly about the room trying to fit into its surroundings that delicate personality, which like a butterfly, a little flower, or any beautiful fragile thing, had been so easily crushed by the first blow. And gradually as she did so, in her lethargy of overstrained nerves, Mary began almost to think of herself as the dead girl; to be Amabel Lamfire waiting for Alderson Cree who never came, instead of Mary Reddin in a wrung anguish of dread for David. With this feeling upon her she looked down at the old woman on the bed with almost a sense that she and not Mrs. Reddin was her mother.

The shrivelled old nut-cracker face framed in wisps of grey hair lay upon its pillows very small and very quiet just then. The eyes were almost shut, and the breathless stillness of the whole figure brought Mary with a startled gasp out of her dazed mood, and made her bend down quickly, listening to make sure that the old woman was still alive. But even as she looked and in her doubt was about to call Mrs. Cooper, old Martha opened sudden wide bright eyes upon her.

She looked at Mary for a moment, and then her gaze went 'round the room until it fell upon Mrs. Cooper's sleeping figure.

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"Der yer want anything, A'nt Marthy?" Mary questioned, speaking in a somewhat raised voice to catch her attention.

A frown of annoyance drew the old faint eyebrows together, and Martha made a feeble warning gesture.

"Hesh, don't talk so loud, you'll wake her up," she whispered, "an' I got somethin' ter say jest ter you."

"Yes? What is hit?" Mary answered, speaking clearly, but in a tone to match the other's.

Martha stretched out one feeble clawlike hand and clutched the girl's delicately strong one.

"Ther was something I hed ter say — somethin' I hed ter say jest ter you," she repeated wanderingly, "what was hit? Somethin' erbout er hunt"; she paused again, pondering, as though her thoughts went slowly, feeling their way.

"Yes," she resumed suddenly, nodding her head, "ther was er hunt — er hunt on Peter's Ridge an' they killed Alderson Cree — but first Alderson, him an' me betwixt us — we killed Ammy — Amabel Lamfire." She paused as always over the name, and went drifting away on that track. "Ammy — Amabel," she whispered. "Der yer know Ammy?" she questioned, her eyes searching Mary's face with bright interrogation. "No!" she cried with the same suddenness that her mind had been swept from one direction to another all night; "no, Ammy's dead — she's dead! Alderson

and me killed her! Alderson Cree — Aha-a! Alderson Cree, when you didn't come ter my girl, yer didn't know you'd ever be begging me ter take yer word ter Dave — that was hit — that was hit!" she broke off with quick illumination. "That was what I hed ter tell yer, hit was ther word Alderson Cree sent ter Dave."

"Ter Dave!" cried Mary. She had scarcely been listening to the tangle of crazy words, but the name arrested her attention sharply.

"Yes, yes, ter Dave," the other hurried on, her mind clear for the moment. "I was comin' erlong ther path by ther Maple Spring that day, an' when I got close to hit, I says I'll git me er drink; but jest as I was erbout ter step out ter ther spring I heered somethin' kinder moan, an' I stopped an' looked an' hit was Alderson Cree—shot in ther back. Alderson Cree—' she faltered over the name, and paused, losing the thread of her story.

"Yes, yes, I understand — it was Alderson Cree," Mary cried feverishly. "Yes, A'nt Marthy, go on!"

With an effort Martha resumed. "An' es I stopped an' looked he was prayin' — prayin'! —" she broke off into her distracted laughter. "Alderson Cree was er prayin'!" she cried with peal after peal of crazy, triumphant glee.

"An' then d'rectly he heered me," she went on presently, as her laughter spent itself," he heered me an' "— but there she paused with a quick-drawn breath. Her sharp ear had caught the sound of Mrs. Cooper stirring in her chair. With a deep yawn and

stretching herself the latter rose and came leisurely over to the bed. Old Martha's mouth closed tight and her eyes dropped.

"Yes, A'nt Marthy, yes!" Mary begged; "Go on with ther word Alderson Cree sent." But the old woman lay white and still and without a quiver of an eyelash, and looking down at her, Mrs. Cooper shook her head.

"Po' soul — she's mighty nigh gone; she don't hear er word you say," she said. "Hit's after one," she went on. "I managed ter git er little drowse after all, an' now I kin take ther rest er ther watchin' an' you kin sleep."

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Mary shook her head. "I don't want ter rest," she said; "besides I'm most sure A'nt Marthy was tryin' ter tell me somethin'."

"Well, she may have been — but she'll not tell nothin' ter nobody now," the other returned, looking again at the still face. "An' yer'd better git some rest fer yer looks white es er sheet."

Mary looked again hesitatingly at Martha, and truly she seemed to have lost all consciousness of her surroundings, and of what she had tried to say, and believing that the other woman must be right, the girl rose at length from her own chair with a weary sigh, and crossed over to the vacant one by the table.

Though it had seemed impossible for her to sleep, yet after she had put her head down upon the table, pillowed on her arms, she had not sat thus very long, listening to the rain without, before she was in a troubled

tormented sleep, in which all the anguish of the day released by slumber whirled through her brain in fantastic and horrifying dreams, startling her time and again confusedly awake. At length, however, she fell into a deep exhausted sleep in which dreams and all consciousness vanished away.

In the first dim streaks of dawn she was awakened by Mrs. Cooper shaking her by the shoulder. Mary started up quickly, confused by sleep and by her unaccustomed surroundings, and with a feeling that a cold weight of unhappiness was waiting to settle back upon her as soon as she came fully to herself.

"I got ter go now," Mrs. Cooper said standing over her. "I got ter git home an' see ter breakfast — Dan hes ter hev hit powerful soon, now that he's working up at Whitcomb's camp. But I'll go by ther Snyders an' send some er them right up, so's hit'll only be er little bit you'll be here by yerself."

"But—but I can't stay here all alone!" Mary cried, stumbling to her feet. In the grey light of the rainy dawn, the cabin looked incredibly dreary and deserted, while outside the high wind left by the storm tore up the valley in moaning gusts.

"I'll send ther Snyder folks right up," Mrs. Cooper urged; "an' I got ter go. She's still in er stupor an' ther ain't nothin' I kin do." Mary looked about the desolate room in shaken dread, and it seemed impossible that she should stay there all alone with the dying woman. But as her gaze went past Mrs. Cooper's fat shoulder it fell upon Martha and she saw that she

was awake and conscious. It seemed to Mary that the old face held in it an eager appeal, and remembering all at once that she had seemed about to tell her something in the night, which Mrs. Cooper's awakening had put a stop to, Mary took a sudden resolve to stay.

"All right I'll — I'll stay," she said. "Only tell

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er's she "I'll tell 'em, an' they'll be right up, I know," the other returned, much relieved that she should be able to get away.

She wen' over to the door and looked out, pausing

dubiously over the weather.

"Hit's rainin' mighty hard still," she said; "an' I reckon I'd better jest take that ole umbrel er settin' over there in ther corner — I'll send hit right back by Allie Snyder."

So saying she crossed over to the corner, and taking the umbrella bestowed one more ominous look and shake of the head upon Martha; and gathering up her gingham skirts about her enormous ankles, she raised the umbrella and waded heavily through the grass of the dooryard, and went away in the damp chill dawn.

Martha watched her go with resentment in her eyes, and a half-formed gesture of her hand as though to shake her fist at her, but she changed her mind quickly, and instead beckoned to Mary.

"Raise me up a bit," she panted. "How der yer reckon I kin breathe layin' in er holler like this?" she added fretfully.

Mary raised her almost to a sitting posture, and propped her against the pillows. Her breathing was very hard now, and the light faint in her eyes, and Mary, who had watched by more than one death-bed, knew that she was almost gone. But her mind was clearer than it had been all night.

"I got ter tell yer — I got ter," she gasped, "Lean down close — listen good," she continued as the girl bent over her. The voice was almost a whisper and Mary had to lean close to catch it. "Ther word Alderson Cree sent ter Dave was not ter kill Kip Ryerson — not ter kill him, do yer understan'?"

"What!" cried Mary, springing erect and staring down at her. "What der yer mean?"

"Yes, yes!" the other gasped, nodding her old head. "I come erlong jest after Dave went ter git help, an' Alderson was er layin' on his side with er great soak er blood on his back — an' he was er prayin' —" she paused, struggling for breath; "he was er prayin' ter live jest till Dave come, so's he could make him take back his promise."

"Oh!" cried Mary, and clasped her hands hard.

"An' then he heered me in ther bresh," the other stumbled on; "an' he jest begged an' prayed me ter come ter him — but I wouldn't — an' then he cussed me cause I never let on I heered, an' when I run he heered me, an' hollered after me he'd be er settin' on the door-step er Hell er waitin' fer me when I come, ef I didn't tell Dave. But I didn't tell — I didn't tell," she cried shrilly. "An' I ain't erfraid er you neither,

Alderson Cree! You kin set ther till Jedgement Day fer all I keer," she screamed.

For a moment she lay still again, panting.

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"I knowed Kip first of all when he come back," she went on again in a moment, fighting for the words. "I knowed him an' that was what I meant erbout ther shadder follerin' Dave — but I wouldn't er told —" she paused suddenly looking hard at Mary with dim strange eyes. "Der yer reckon I'm erfraid er Alderson Cree?" she demanded. "I ain't—I ain't erfraid er any livin' soul that ever walked, Crees er not," she went on fiercely. "But I'm er tellin' you cause every night Ammy comes an' looks at me with her little pitiful face an' says jest like she used ter—'You an' me's best friends, ain't we, Mammy?' An' then she says, 'O Mammy, ain't yer done ernough harm — ain't yer satisfied yit?""

She broke off abruptly and there was a gurgle in her throat. "Yes, honey, yes!" she panted, "Mammy's told — she's told now."

For a moment again she was still, and then all at once she shot up suddenly to her knees in the bed. "Aha-a, Alderson Cree!" she cried, doubling her hard fists, and shaking her bony arms straight and stiff over her head. "Keep er settin' ther — keep er watchin', you'll never git me," she screamed with a broken laugh; "Ammy an' me's goin' — Ammy!" she cried and fell back a dead crumpled heap among the pillows.

Mary bent over her quickly, feeling for her heart, and knew that she was dead.

Mechanically she straightened the shrivelled limbs upon the bed, and folded the hands upon the breast. Then she sprang up and fled eagerly out of the cabin, "I got ter tell Dave — I got ter!" she cried to herself. "Oh! maybe I'll be in time vit!"

But at the yard fence she paused in horror — How could she leave the lonesome dead body unattended in that deserted place?

Wildly she looked down the path of the hollow and screamed again and again at the top of her voice, but there was no answer — only the echo from the encircling mountains. She wrung her hands frantically together and burst into dry sobs.

"O Lord, send somebody quick," she wept. "Send somebody quick — for I've got ter go!"

She ran distractedly back to the cabin and entered again its one little room, though now for a moment she hesitated upon the threshold in hysterical terror at being alone with what the room held.

Though she had left it but a second before the house seemed changed and sacred now, and the figure upon the bed, which such a short time ago had been just a poor half-crazy old woman, in the quickness of an eye flash had taken on all the reverent mystery and distinction of death.

Wringing her hands and calling on God to send someone quickly, Mary paced up and down the room, occasionally rushing to the fence to call desperately down the hollow, only to start the echoes once more, and to return at last to watch in the sombre room.

It seemed hours to the distracted girl that she waited alone in the little remote hollow with only the dead woman keeping her company, and with the message for David crying out to be told; it was in reality only a short time before she caught sight of Mrs. Snyder, and her sister-in-law, Jane McCurdy, approaching along the path.

With a cry Mary rushed out of the house to meet them.

"She's dead!" she screamed. "She's dead — an' I was all erlone — an' I got ter tell Dave — I got ter go before hit's too late!" and without pausing she fled wildly by them and disappeared down the hollow, her hair blown about her face, and her light skirts soaked by the steady drizzle of the morning, and whipped about her by the high wind.

The two women looked after her in surprise.

"Po' little thing! she's skeered most ter death," they said. "Ann Cooper certainly ought ter er had better sense than ter er left her all erlone that erway."

And then turning they went on to their duty in the cabin — their duty, with the completion of which the history of the Lamfires of the Mossy Run Hollow fell shut, like the closing of a book.

CHAPTER XXI

THE VICTOR

At an early hour, which was no longer true night yet was scarcely dawn, for only the faintest grey tinge of light struck across the darkness, George Hedrick, in the little attic room over his store, was awakened from the first sound sleep which the raging of the storm and the wind had permitted him all night, by a sudden agonized pounding on his cutside door. He started broad awake, and again the sound came. Springing from his bed, and crying out "All right!" he dragged on a few clothes hastily, and lighting his lamp descended to the store.

The pounding was wildly continuous now, as though someone were beside himself for admission.

"Yes! yes! I'm er comin'," he cried fitting the key to the lock and flinging open the door. At its opening the figure of a woman scudded in and stopped in the middle of the room.

It was Judith Cree, and as she stood in the dim lamplight she faced Hedrick with horror in her eyes, one hand gripping the edge of the counter hard.

"George," she cried, "O George!" and could get no further.

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Hedrick's hand trembled and he set the lamp down quickly.

"Has Dave done hit?" he said.

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"I don't know, I don't know — an' I'm most crazy," she answered in a low stunned voice.

She stood motionless, her hand hard against the counter, her dress wet and dishevelled, her faded hair slipping down upon her shoulders, and her terrified wild eyes fixed upon the storekeeper.

"O George!" she cried again in the same appalled tone. "I sent him ter do hit. He come home an'—an' he didn't seem like he was goin' ter, an' I stirred him up all I knowed how, an' he went inter ther house an' got his pistol, an' went off jest es ther storm was comin' up. I sent him, George—I made him go! I don't know what devil's been in me—but hit seems jest like I'd been dead so's I couldn't feel nothin' fer ten years, an' yesterday I jest come erlive all at onct, an' I didn't think ther was anythin' I keered fer 'cept ter hev Kip Ryerson paid off, till I seed Dave goin' erway in'er ther dark." Her voice fell away into silence but still her eyes held the man.

"I seed him go," she went on again, a blind dismay in her face. "I seed him go, an' at first I was glad, but then I got ter studyin' on ther way he looked when he went off, an' I been er seein' his face that erway all night, an' thinkin' how he was when he was er little feller — an' then seein' him over an' over ergin, goin' erway down ther hill in ther dark, an' knowin' all ther time that hit was me made him go — me, his own

mother! Oh! I don't know what's been ther matter with me, George, but hit don't seem like hit could er been me that keered more fer my hate than I did fer my chile!"

She put her shaking hands up to her face, but she did not weep, and her tearless dismayed eyes still looked over i.er fingers into the storekeeper's face with a wide

and frightened gaze.

"O George," she cried, "won't yer please, please ter find him an' make him come back — I'd go myself but I know I couldn't do nothin' with him now — not after what I said — an' I do b'lieve he'd do more fer you than fer any other man in ther Draft. O God!" she cried, her voice falling to a whisper, "I been er terrible wicked woman!" She paused a moment and then rushed on again; "tell him I'd cut my tongue out to take back ther words I said ter him. Oh! ask him ef he minds what I was 'fore Alderson Cree was kilt — tell him that's what I am now, an' not ther dead devil I've been all these years."

"Which way did Dave go?" the storekeeper broke in quietly, shaking himself into his coat the while,

and extinguishing the lamp.

"O George, yer er good man!" she cried fervently. "I don't know which erway Dave went, but he must er gone first up ter Whitcomb's."

"Well, then I'll go up there right off," Hedrick said, stepping beside her out into the morning freshness

and damp, and locking the door after him.

They swung into the road together, and all the way

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to the Cree farm Judith kept up a wild stream of talk. The woman who for those ten long years had carried herself so silently and so frozen was almost passionately eager to talk now. The sluice gates of her reserve were opened, and scarcely seeming aware of what she was saving she poured out all her heart to the storekeeper. She seemed strangely and curiously alive too, as though she had but just found herself, and as though her own personality was a wonder and a surprise to her. Over and over she recited her interview with David, breaking out upon herself with wild remorse. Then her mind went back into the past, and she told Hedrick all the little details of Alderson's murder, and of their difficult struggle in the years afterwards, as though the storekeeper had never heard of them - and all the time her manner was that of a person who had been away from the Draft a long time, and coming back had many things to tell.

They came at last to the Cree place, and there, as Judith turned in at the gate, she cried once more, "Make him come back, George — oh! make him come back fer God's sake!"

"I'll do ther best I kin fer yer, Judy," he answered, and went away up the road, between the fence rows still cold and dim in the wet greyness of the morning.

When Judith reached her own door-step, it seemed to her that she could not enter the house and take up the common tasks of the morning in her feverish state and while so much that was awful was happening in her world; therefore, though she was chilled and soaked

to the skin by the rain, she sat down upon the porch step and strained her eyes in anxious looking up the Draft, if perhaps she might see David come suddenly round the turn.

As she sat there the figure of Mary Reddin came all at once flying out of the rain and mist of the morning and almost ran into her arms.

"Where's Dave — where's Dave?" Mary cried, laying trembling hands upon Judith, and almost shaking her. "Oh! where is Dave — I got er message for him!"

"I don't know," Judith panted. "God knows I wished I did. I reckon he must er gone ter Whitcomb's camp—he come home yesterday evening an' I mocked him cause he hadn't killed Kip, an' then he went erway an' I ain't seen him since—but he must er gone ter ther camp."

"You sent him - you mocked him?" Mary cried.

Judith nodded. "I did, God fergive me," she said. "Then yer er wicked, wicked old woman, an' God'll

not fergive you!" cried the girl vehemently, and with a passionate gesture she flung herself away and sped off down the hill in the rain.

George Hedrick walked along the road heavy with mud, blown through and through by the high wind of the morning, which amounted to almost a gale, and beaten upon by the steady rain, and his frame of mind was scarcely a cheerful one.

"Go?" he muttered in scorn of himself. "Er course I'll go. I never yit seed er mess er any kind

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come erlong that wa'n't my business in no ways whatever that I didn't manage ter run my head inter hit, some how er another. Now jest loo! at this—here I've knowed Crees all my life an' I know 'em ter be jest ther very worst kind er people ter fool with when they're stirred up, an' yit here I go er trompin' erlong this blamed muddy road er lookin' fer Dave Cree, who as fer temper, is er Cree right through ter their back bone an' out ther other side. An' anyhow I'd jest like ter know what kinder good my sayin' 'Come home with me, Dave, yer Mammy's frettin' erbout yer,' 's goin' ter do—me erbout comin' up ter his shoulder an' no mo'."

Here a fierce gust of wind cut through him and he shivered again in the early chill.

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"An' ef Dave don't take my head an' jest natu'ally crack hit erginst Kip's fer interferin' with his business, an' settle us both at one clip, I'll certainly git my death er cold in this yere storm an' wind," he complained. "An' me not had off my winter flannels mor'n er week. But I allers did think ther wa'n't er truer sayin' than that erbout ther Lord sendin' er tempest er wind ter ther shorn lamb."

But for all his grumbling George Hedrick got himself over the ground very quickly, and his face was grave and anxious. And once or twice as his mind went back to Judith Cree's wild remorseful face, and remembered the torrent of her words revealing all the passionate hate and suffering of her silent years, which now in the telling seemed to come out of her with the

tearing fury of the devils of old, he muttered with deep conviction — "Hit's er terruble thing ter be er woman!"

A mile or so behind him up that same rough track, on frantic eager feet, Mary Reddin was labouring breathlessly—though the distance now, coupled as it was with her headlong flight from the Mossy Hollow, already began to seem very long and very difficult.

So it happened that when David Cree awoke that morning in the deserted shanty, and realizing where he was and for what purpose he was there rose quickly and prepared to take up his quest, he came, as he stepped across the rotting doorsill, face to face with the storekeeper, who having beer to Whitcomb's camp in his search for him was then on his way to the Daws to make further inquiries.

Hedrick drew a breath of relief when he saw David and came to a stand.

"I was lookin' fer yer, Dave," he said.

"Was yer?" David replied coolly and indifferently, preparing to pass him. "I'm erlookin' for somebody else."

Hedrick put out his hand hastily and laid it on his arm. "Hole on, Dave—hole on," he cried desperately, "I got er message fer yer from yer mother."

"Then yer kin tell her from me," David answered quickly, "that hit ain't done yit — but that hit will be — she needn't ter fret"; and again he tried to move on. But Hedrick's grasp tightened.

"Wait, Dave, wait!" he cried. "Hit ain't that—she don't want yer ter do hit. She's pretty nigh crazy over what she said ter yer. She come ter me this mornin' most 'fore day, an' asked me ter find yer, an' say she'd jest giv' anythin'—she'd cut her tongue out—ter take back what she said ter yer."

"Then she says hit too late," David returned coldly and grimly.

"She said," the other rushed on, "ter ask yer ef yer recollected what she was like 'fore Alderson was kilt — she says that's ther way she is now, an' not ther dead devil she's been all these years since."

David shook his head. "I don't recollect how she was," he returned indifferently. "I don't seem ter recollect nothin' before that — But I tell you, George, ther's one thing I do recollect, an' that's ther promise I made ter my father — an' jest now I'm ertendin' ter that — an' nothin' else," and the man's mouth set itself into a straight inflexible line.

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"Then, Dave," said Hedrick solemnly, "I hate ter do hit, but I swear ef yer go on after Kip Ryerson, I'm ergoin' down ter Linden jest as straight es ever I know how, an' notify ther Sheriff; I hate ter do hit, Dave—I certainly do, but I will jest es sure es I'm er livin' man, I will."

"D—n yer Sheriff an' d—n you too!" David broke out furiously. "Yer kin notify ther whole world fer all I keer — yer won't none er yer ketch me — not till I've done what I intend doin' an' maybe yer won't then!"

"Dave," said Hedrick gently, changing his tone, "I keer er whole heap fer you, an' I jest hate ter see you ruinin' yerself body an' soul this erway jest fer er ole promise, an' I don't b'lieve fer one minute ef Alderson hed er hed time ter think twict that he'd ever er laid hit on yer—he wa'n't that kind of er feller. Think what yer er doin', Dave. Think, think, boy," he pleaded. "Der yer reckon fer er second that yer er doin' what's right? That yer got any kind of er right ter ruin yer own soul, an' send ernother inter ther presence of God, 'fore He's sent fer him?"

"An' how der yer know God didn't send me fer

him?" David demanded.

"God'll send fer him when He's ready, but He'll not send by you, an' yer know hit," the storekeeper returned, "an' yer know hit," he repeated. "I've watched yer scuffle erlong ever since Alderson was kilt an' I know ther stuff an' ther spunk that's in yer—oh, my boy, don't go an' ruin yerself no..," he implored. "jest es yer gittin' somewheres."

"Where's Dave—where's Dave Cree?" A girl with drawn face and sobbing breath—a drenched and haggard wraith of the storm—was demanding frantically at the kitchen door of Whitcomb's lumber camp.

The cook—the first to be up in the camp, and scarcely yet awake—looked at her curiously and half startled. "Lord, how'm I ter know?" he said. "He come here last night but he went erway ergin almost d'rectly."

"He went erway ergin?" the girl repeated, pressing her hand against her heaving breast.

The man nodded. "Yes, jest es ther storm broke," he said.

"Jest es ther storm broke," the girl repeated in a dazed voice, and turning stumbled away out of the yard.

"David Cree," the storekeeper went on sternly, laying closer hands upon him. "Look at me an' tell me yer b'lieve yer doin' what's right. Look at me, boy—" he pleaded. "Look at me like yer would have done ef I was yer father, an' tell me yer b'lieve in yer soul yer doin' right."

David drew himself away with a bewildered look, and put his hand to his forehead.

"George," he said, "I don't know what's right an' what's wrong no more. Hit's God's truth I don't, I'm tore first one way an' then tother, an' which is right I jest don't know. I only know one thing fer certain, an' that is that I give my promise ter settle with that snake, an' hit seems like I've got ter do hit, whether hit's God's work or ther devil's — an' afterwards they kin settle betwixt 'em which one I belong ter.

"Yer er good little feller, George," he went on, laying his hand on the other's shoulder; "an' I'm much erbliged ter yer. But I promised — I promised! An' I promised hit harder than I ever did anything in all my life. An' I can't fergit hit, George, I can't."

"Then God have mercy on yer, Dave!" Hedrick said simply.

And after a short instant David stepped by him and

started resolutely along the road to the river.

In the water-soaked woods of the early dawn of that May morning, Hedrick stood still in the road, knowing his defeat and watching David's stern figure go steadily on its way.

The heavy drizzle of rain continued, and added to it, in high sudden gusts, the wind flung down the collected moisture from the green leaves, though in truth they were hardly as yet big enough to hold a full drop of rain.

In the depressing cold light Hedrick's face looked old and worn, and unusually grave, and as he watched David he took in his breath with a sharp click of regret and compassion.

But in that moment a sudden broken and exhausted little voice cut the forlorn stillness of the woods, flinging itself past Hedrick and leaping on after David's de-

parting figure with breathless entreaty.

"Dave, Dave! O Dave, wait!" it cried desperately. The voice was spent, and not very loud, and the storekeeper scarcely made out the words, but David, though he was some distance further away, heard the first faint cry and turned like a flash, and storm-tossed, drenched with rain, and utterly weary, Mary Reddin stumbled past Hedrick and up the mountain to David.

"Dave," she cried with sobbing breath; and flung herself upon him, clinging to him, and twining her

arms about his neck as though she would never let him go.

But after that first quick turn, David had stood still in the road, not going to meet her; and when she clung to him, after the one instant when his arms had closed upon her spasmodically, he put up his hands and tried to unclasp her fingers from about his neck, his face resolute but very white.

"Let me go, honey," he said gently — "yer must let me go."

But with all the strength that was left in her she clung to him closer and more vehemently, and all the time, between her difficult poignant breath, she kept crying his name beseechingly — "Dave, Dave!" over and over as though it was all she had voice for.

Her heart beat as though it would leap into her throat, a mist was before her eyes; her ears roared, and in her mouth was the sharp taste of blood. For her frantic anguished search for David had strained her powers to their very utmost, and only the spur of the message she had to deliver could ever have carried her in such haste over the long difficult miles. She felt as though black waters were rushing upon her, and that only the need of the message kept her from sinking away to be entirely drowned in them; and at last even that need vanished in the surge and roar of the water, and all at once her grasp relaxed from about David's neck, her arms slipped limply down, and, but for his catching her to him suddenly and passionately, as he felt her slip, she would have fallen to the ground.

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Her breath shook her all over in painful throbbing gasps, her eyes had dropped almost shut, and from violent scarlet her face had gone dead white, with faint ghastly shadows of grey and blue about her lips and under her eyes.

David thought she was going to die in his arms, and in a frantic agony of fear he clutched her tight and

called to her.

"Mary, Mary, my sweetheart," he cried. He laid her down by the roadside, and with the storekeeper's assistance fanned her and chafed her hands distractedly, crying to her wildly, again and again. At last in answer to his voice she opened her eyes for one faint moment.

"Don't go, Dave — don't leave me," she panted out. David caught her up against his breast. "My sweetheart, my darlin', I won't leave yer. Never, never! Not for nothin' — nothin'," and suddenly remembering, with his disengaged arm he caught his pistol from his pocket, and with a great sweep of his hand he flung it far away from him into the green undergrowth, where it fell through the leaves with a tearing crash.

"Sweetheart! Sweetheart! My darlin', my honey—I'll never leave yer—never!" he cried again; all the poignancy of his love let loose in great bounding waves of fire that tore the very vitals of his being and utterly obliterated and swept away every other emotion.

"Not fer - not even fer Kip?" Mary gasped.

"Not fer nothin'. Nothin', nothin!" he cried with hot kisses.

And Mary knew all at once that she had won — had won without even Aiderson Cree's message.

She shut her eyes again and lay still, and it was very hard to breathe, her ears still roared and the black waters were still upon lar, but David's arm was about her and she was not afraid of anything any more.

At last the colour began to creep faintly back to her face, changing its deathlike greyness to a delicate pink, and the frantic leaps of her heart grew easier; she opened her eyes and struggled up to a sitting posture.

"I got er message fer yer, Dave," she said feebly. "Er message from ole A'nt Marthy Lamfire. O Dave, listen — listen. Alderson Cree sent w "d by her fer yer not ter kill Kip Ryerson — not ter kill him —"

"What!" cried David, "what did yer say, honey?"

Mary nodded her head and went on breathlessly. "Not ter kill Kip. Ter make yer take yer promise back. A'nt Marthy tole me all how hit happened. She came erlong by ther Maple Spring jest after you went ter git help, an' there she saw Alderson layin' on his side an' prayin' — prayin' out loud with all his soul jest ter live till yer got back so's he could tell yer not ter do hit — Dave! that he didn't want yer ter do hit."

"I knowed hit — I knowed hit!" the storekeeper burst out. "I tole yer, Dave — I tole yer ef he'd jest hed twict ter think he wouldn't er done hit — I tole yer so!"

But David stood still in the road, his eyes astounded, and his face white and amazed.

"Good God!" he whispered as the words came home to him. "Good God!"

"An' then," Mary panted on, "then while he was prayin' he heered A'nt Marthy in the bresh an' he hollered ter her ter take ther word ter you — but she wouldn't let on she heered, an' then he cussed her, an' when she was skeered an' run he hollered terrible things after her. But she never tole, cause she allers blamed him fer Ammy's death, so she wouldn't tell yer out er spite. But I set up with her last night, an' this mornin' jest 'fore she died she tole me."

"Is ole A'nt Marthy dead?" the storekeeper questioned.

"Yes, yes, she's dead — she died this mornin' when I was all erlone with her — I was all erlone. Mis' Cooper hed gone home an' I was jest all erlone, Dave!" she cried, her terror of that time returning upon her.

But David was still, his mind groping back into the past, to fit this sudden revelation to his last remembrance of his father.

"You was there — der yer recollect how he died wantin' ter say somethin' ter me only he couldn't — der yer reckon that was what he was tryin' ter say?"

"Hit must er been, I reckon," the other answered.

"An' I jest got down on my knees an' giv' him my promise all over ergin," David whispered, "jest all over ergin, never thinkin' hit could be anythin' else he canted."

Mary got up weakly from the bank and laid her trembling hands on his shoulders.

"Dave," she said, "you've flung erway yer pistol, an' I know yer keer fer me, an' now you've got er message almost like hit was from ther dead—won't yer promise me yer won't go after Kip no mo'?"

David was silent a very long time, his mind going back to that last look on his father's face; to all his arguments and struggles with himself; to Mary's pleadings and to his mother's frantic remorse.

"Please, please, Dave," Mary begged. Her face had had time to lose its faint return of colour, and to grow white and frightened again, and the storekeeper was fidgeting anxiously.

David laid one of his hands on each of hers as they rested on his shoulders, and looked down into her upturned face. At last he spoke.

"I promise yer, sweethert," he said slowly, a pause between each word, and then he stooped and kissed her solemnly without passion.

Afterwards the three stood looking into one another's faces in silence — the silence after deep emotion. Save for the steady soft roar of the rain, and for the tumultuous wind gusts, the woods were very quiet and the mysterious faint mist which the wind drove here

and there seemed suddenly dropping a curtain between the three and the outside world, shutting them into some strange remote chamber, even as the revelation of Alderson Cree's message had opened for them strange and curious chambers of their souls.

CHAPTER XXII

THE END OF THE GAME

It was George Hedrick who, first recovering himself, broke through the awed silence that had settled on all the three out there on the top of the wet mountain, swallowed up in its enshrouding mists, faced by the strangeness of circumstances, and bewildered by their own emotions.

"Well," he said shrugging up his small shoulders, and returning to something of his usual buoyancy, "yer runs up erginst er whole heap er funny things in this world, an' I'm mighty glad yer do — specially on this ercasion — but hits er powerful wet mornin' jest ter be standin' round thinkin' how cur'us things is, an' seein' es we ain't none of us what yer might call dry, I votes we all g'home an' change our close an' then take er right good think."

David and Mary shifted their positions, and drawing deep breaths laughed in weary relief; for after the long strain of sharp emotion it was good and restful to smile once more and take things easily, forgetting for the time that under the blanket of the world's gaiety there lurked always a black, hollow-eyed seriousness, which might at the securest moment look suddenly

and terrifyingly forth. Good to laugh, and for the moment to forget, for had they not laughed they might just then have been unreasonably compelled to do just the opposite.

"You po' little honey," David said tenderly, putting his arm about Mary's waist, and supporting her as they started down the mountain; "you po' little thing, you must be most dead."

Mary looked at him with wide bright eyes. "Not so near dead es I was er little bit ergo," she answered with a laugh that quivered.

Walking behind them Hedrick broke into a shrill whistle, a whistle of many flourishes and much triumph, and of exceeding loudness — astonishing loudness, when one remembered the extreme smallness, not to say meagreness, of the person conducting it. A whistle which was partly to drown to his own ears any whispers which David and Mary might have for each other, was partly a stout defiance of the weather's unpleasantness, but was most of all an expression of his own supreme satisfaction over the termination of the morning's work.

's far as David and Mary were concerned, however, his discretion was wasted, for they were too subdued to talk much, and were besides too shaken out of the usual ruts of reserve to have greatly cared even if Hedrick had chanced to overhear anything they might have had to say. Mary, morover, was still so physically exhausted, that the mere effort of walking, even with David's arm about her, required all her strength.

But exhausted as she was, there was yet a joyful peace and relief upon her — a peace such as she had never tasted, for it was that which comes after fierce effort, and what fierce, passionate effort was, Mary Reddin had only known since the day before. She felt as though the morning of vesterday were years and years ago, and she herself almost an old woman as compared to the light-hearted girl who, dressed in her pink muslin, had gone so happily and so gaily to preaching. And it was all true enough, she was older — older with the aging of circumstances and the education of fear; and for her ever again to be the same care-free and unafraid personality that she had been was as impossible as for the hatched chicken to creep back to its comatose condition in the shell. She might be - nay she would be — gav and happy once more, but it would be a gaiety in the background of which there lurked, to give it balance, a realization of the seriousness of life — the realization which comes only with actual experience - never by any amount of greybeard warnings.

David too felt an upspringing of peace and relief. He seemed to himself no longer blown hither and thither by every varying breath of his emotions — the plaything of love and hate — he had chosen his own path and the weary confusion of indecision lad fallen from him. Circumstances had indeed fought for him, but it seemed good to know at the last that he had been sure of his own mind. That he had made the choice for himself, knowing that in the end love, and not hate,

was his master passion. Therefore he went down the mountain, his head held high, the night's dark be-wilderment already appearing like an indistinct dream, and he at last his own strong determined self. His love was in the circle of his arm and in front the way lay homeward before them; the calm, the quiet way of their every-day existence, so sweet and so desirable now as compared to the storm-tossed and passion-racked paths of the night. And if in this new tranquillity there was also a certain arrogance, it was bred of the belief that at last he knew himself, and in the knowledge was secure.

The world seemed water-soaked that morning with the high wind blowing through the trees, and with the remembrance of the night's heavy storm. Confronted by the drenched outlook of wet blown trees and thick sky, Mary and David, after the deluge of their own emotions, felt a little as perhaps Noah and his small company felt when they came down from Mount Ararat to the clean new world below them. In her present tranquillity and sense of security, something of this thought occurred to Mary, and looking up at David she whispered, "I feel jest like I'd been 'most drowned, an' then somehow come back ter life ergin, an' found everything was all right."

David looked down ther in answer, and after a moment would have spoken, but in that instant the storekeeper behind them broke suddenly off in his whistle with a low ejaculation of dismay. David raised his head with a quick jerk, and there in the road,

which the previous moment had been empty and peaceful before him, stood Kip Ryerson.

At the sight David stiffened all over with a sudden tense quiver. But Mary gripped his arm tight —

"Dave!" she cried, "Dave, you promised me!"

And at her words, and the clutch of her hands, David checked himself, and with the relaxing again of his muscles a long tremble went over him like the sharp vibration of a tweaked wire.

But in that moment Kip Ryerson made a fatal mistake. He had been walking carelessly, secure in the belief that his enemy pursued him miles distant on the other side of the river, and then raising his eyes he looked suddenly out of this security to behold him instead directly in the way before him. David Cree was the man he most feared in all the world, and as he came upon him thus unexpectedly, with the startled panic of the coward his hand flew back instinctively to his hip pocket. But, quick as the gesture was, David saw it and was quicker, and with a bound like the freed snap of a bent sapling he closed upon him.

David Cree was a very strong man, much stronger usually than his opponent, but fear in that crisis lent Ryerson a sudden insanity of strength, and he fought with the impetuosity and violence of terror. There are some experiences never translated into words, but which rear themselves for always as grim monuments of certain emotions — and for Kip Ryerson, the tearing remembrance of David Cree's fingers at his throat had come to stand for the very climax of fear — and

now met again by that furious onslaught, he fought with the ferocity and anguish of fright of a cornered wild beast; thrashing himself back and forth in the other's grasp, twisting, turning, and biting, a mad, blind, terrified animal — fighting neither with sudden anger, nor smouldering hate, but just with the black passion of terror, and the poignant love of his own life.

Thus the conflict prolonged itself: David, held by his promise, not putting forth all his power, merely trying to disarm the other, and Ryerson with all his frantic strength fighting to turn his pistol and shoot. Up and down and across the road they fought. The little pebbles slipping from under their feet and flying with tiny splashes into the undergrowth; their breath wrung out of them in hoarse grunts as their bodies jerked back and forth; their feet making long struggling scrapes in the wet treacherous road-bed, and the grip of their hands slippery with perspiration. In his controlled strength David was slow, and time and again, the other, never still for the flash of a second, twisting, wrenching, springing this side and that, writhed out of his grip, and turned like a wriggling steel snake, and then only David's quick spring averted the shot. And always crazy fear looked from Ryerson's eyes.

As David sprang from her side Mary had screamed piercingly and tried to run in upon the two men, but Hedrick interposed, holding her off firmly. "No! No!" he cried, "you an' me can't do nothin' now, 'cept wait fer ther end — an' keep out er ther way," he

added, dragging her to one side and placing himself in front of her as for a moment Ryerson's pistol wavered in their direction.

Thus in their helplessness they stood and watched perforce, themselves the only spectators of the conflict; its setting the steep mountain road, the wet wind-tossed forest, and the grey and sullen skies of the morning, and over all the stillness of the woods.

Except for the deep catching of his breath David fought in a silent wordless intensity, and in spite of his excitement it flashed back upon the storekeeper that that was the way he had once in his youth seen Alderson Cree fight. Ryerson, on the other hand, spent his treath in gasped oaths and hoarse ejaculations. Once David had him almost overthrown, pressing him back and back against the bank, and he could have laughed savagely, brutally - for in the prolonging of the combat his self-control was beginning to slip - at the white panic of terror that looked out of the other's face and bloodshot eyes. But with one of his quick wrenching turns Ryerson sprang away, and for a moment he was free. "D - n you!" he cried, "I'll kill yer like I done Alderson!" With the words he fired, and David felt a sting like a hot flame graze his forehead, and afterwards a crimson curtain of blood dripped into one eve, and .an down his face, and the red taste of it was in his mouth and David was glad, riotously, furiously glad of it, for Ryerson's words and the pinch of pain had loosed the bonds of his restraint, and he forgot - he forgot his promise, he

forgot his love, he forgot everything save only the mad passion of conflict and the sick desire to destroy the man he hated. And the taste of blood, the sticky warm trickle of it, were what he wanted, and were all an answer to his fury, wrapping him in a scarlet cloud of passion, in the midst of which only the face of his enemy hung clear. For the fiend that slept in David Cree was loose now, and even with his own mad devil of fright to back him, Kip Ryerson stood small chance. Even as the pistol shot deafened his ears, David sprang once more and his vice-like grip snapped upon the other. One great hand was upon Ryerson's throat, and one upon his outstretched arm, and David bent him slowly, slowly back. Ryerson's free hand tore at the strangling fingers, but he might as well have tugged at iron rods—and again he went back a little further. The epitome of fear stared out of his bulging eyes and livid face, and his lips were blue and frothing. Yet now the men were almost moveless, for it was only by slow inches that Ryerson went back. There was no heaving struggle, only the tense meeting of muscle upon muscle, the coughing of Ryerson's breath, the heave of David's, and the slow, very slow, going back of one of them. David's grip was like the steady clinch of great jaws snapping tighter and tighter upon a bone; and presently, inevitably, suddenly, the bone would snap.

"Great H—l!" the storekeeper cried under his breath, and made a half movement to run forward. Yet in the end he checked himself, and stood still,

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watching in a stunned breathlessness; and again Ryerson went back a faint inch. His breath was a choking cough now, and David's eyes had the wicked set look that a dog's have just before the bone cracks. Then all at once with a harsh scrape the wet gravel slipped under his feet and Ryerson went down backwards upon the ground, and as he fell David's hand flew along his arm and tore the pistol from his relaxing grasp.

From then to the end was scarcely a bare wink of time, yet the emotions and actions that flashed by upon one another's heels packed it to such overflowing that afterwards it seemed like a long dream.

David stepped back a pace or two, steadying himself, and cocking the pistol noiselessly.

"Get up," he said quietly, terribly.

And dizzily and still half-stunned, Ryerson obeyed mechanically. Yet when he stood up in the road and faced the gaping mouth of the pistol and the white blaze of the face back of it, he flung his arms up before his own eyes with open clutching fingers, and screamed, a hoarse, a horrible scream of fear, that went away on the still air of the morning all up and down the mountain side, and flung its anguish of terror into remote hollows.

"Stand still!" said David.

And save for a long shiver that went over him from head to foot, held in the very paralysis of terror, his face shrinking blindly away in his arms, Kip Ryerson stood still and waited.

For a half-second David paused, then suddenly, astonishingly, with the conflict over, and his enemy cowering before him and absolutely at his mercy, his anger went out as instantly, as completely, as a blown candle — and on the instant of its going he uncocked the pistol with a tiny click, and dropped his hand.

But Ryerson heard the click and misunderstood; flinging his arms wide above his head he screamed again, that frantic anguished scream of fear, but half-way through the cry broke suddenly into gurgling silence, and as they watched him the man bent all at once at the knees, swayed a moment back and forth with the settling tremble of a falling tree, and then plunged forward into the road, and lay still.

For a long moment the three spectators were silent, then George Hedrick went slowly forward and turning Ryerson over felt for his heart.

"He's dead," he said at length. "Dead," he repeated. "Just natu'ally skeered ter death."

And he turned with a shudder of contempt from the fixed horror that stared up at him out of the dead eyes.

David drew a deep breath and looked about him with a half-dazed expression, his hand rising unconconsciously every now and again to dash the trickle of blood out of his eye.

"Mary," he cried, "Mary, I wasn't trying to kill him, I was jest tryin' to keep him from shootin," — he broke off, looking at her with wild eyes that sought justification in her face.

"I wouldn't never have troubled him," he went on

distractedly. "I wouldn't have teched him — I was goin' on by if he hadn't have drawed his gun — I would, Mary, I would er gone on by — honest I would," he pleaded.

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His gaze wavered every now and again from her face to the limp figure in the road, and he was like a man suddenly awakening from sleep to see the last flash of a terrible dream a real thing before his eyes.

Mary took his hand in her cold little fingers and pressed it tremblingly. "I know yer didn't mean to jump on him — I know yer was goin' on by," she said firmly.

But the remembrance of the overmastery of his fury came flooding back upon David, and the realization of his powerlessness in the clutch of the full strength of his passion appalled him, and he tore his hands away.

"But I was — I was fightin' to kill," he cried. "I heered him say 'I'll kill yer like I done Alderson,' and after that I jest didn't keer what happened, and I don't know now why I didn't shoot him at the end, 'cept when he stood up before me like that an' I knowed I could do hit, somehow I jest didn't want to do hit no more."

He stood back from Mary, waving her hands away. "Mary," he cried, "I was fightin' to kill, an' I broke my promise to you."

He said it passionately, insistently. It was as though he would not accept her love without a full understanding on her part, an understanding of that self within himself, which even he did not understand. Yet

though his hands held her off his eyes besought her.

Mary stood still looking at him, and in the look her education moved on a step, for in that pause it came home to her the manner of man she had chosen to love — a man whose passion of anger came and went as abruptly, as violently, as the wind. This time, in spite of his own sudden horror of himself, she knew that he had triumphed, but the next time what might not some twist of circumstance bring forth? A little longer she paused, facing with clear eyes the possibilities of the future; then she went forward, and taking one corner of her limp wet apron she pressed it against the wound on David's forehead.

"You wasn't goin' ter shoot, I seed you wasn't. And hit's over — hit's all over fer now."

Her look and gesture were almost maternal, and though her voice broke there was in it, nevertheless, a certain new note, a note of knowledge, yet of strength and hope as well, and strong determination.

